GAMEINFORMER

STREET FIGHTER 6

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FOR EVERYONE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

LENDING A VOICE

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

IN MY 18 YEARS at *Game Informer*, there's one impression I wish I could do a better job of sharing with our readers. That's the incredible creativity, diverse ideas, and collaborative mindset of the folks working in gaming. Helping push some of those voices forward to a broader audience has been a highlight of my career.

As *Game Informer* continues to push into its fourth decade, it is that remarkable breadth of voices I hope to make a centerpiece of our work. We plan to continue highlighting some of the most well-known voices talking about the most anticipated games on the horizon, like this month's cover story on the next evolution of the long-running Street Fighter franchise (p. 42). And examine the creators shaping the future of games, like in our profile of the new leadership team at Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio in Tokyo (p. 12).

We also want to highlight lesser recognized but no less important voices in the gaming field and the stories they have to share. I had first-hand experience with such a story when I traveled to the far side of the world this month to learn about a fascinating game called Tchia (p. 52).

Our mission extends into finding opportunities to encourage a wider range of voices to share their expertise and thoughts about games as we continue expanding our roster of contributing writers of reviews, previews, and features. Check out Reid McCarter's essay insight into remakes through the lens of The Last of Us Part I for an example of the sort of perspectives we hope to highlight (p. 80).

It's also essential to find new ways to deliver these voices to you and interconnect the many ways we have to tell their stories. As you peruse the magazine, you'll increasingly see ways you can deepen your connection to a given story through video documentaries, interviews, online photo galleries, and more, linking our stories into a bigger picture. Take a look at Alex Van Aken's conversation with Yacht Club Games about their upcoming release of Mina the Hollower on p. 10. And if it sparks your interest, check out his full documentary on the game's creation later this month on *Game Informer's* YouTube channel.

Finally, we want to hear more from one other set of voices – yours. We're driven to bring readers more of what they want to explore. Tell us about what sparks conversations about games for you by sending an email directly to Feedback@GameInformer.com, or share your thoughts on our official Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or Discord communities. We're eager to hear from you.

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
STREET FIGHTER 6

STREET FIGHTER 6

The cover art of this issue was created by Street Fighter 6 designer Goro Tokuda. The art utilizes the trademark street-art style of Street Fighter 6 in depicting longtime franchise icon Ken's new look. Learn more about why he looks so different this time around in our Street Fighter 6 cover story on p. 42

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Charles Harte

Associate Editor

I have a confession: I'm hopelessly in love with Grindstone, the color-matching puzzle game by Capybara Games. When it first came out on Apple Arcade, I played it all the way through in just a few days and moved on, thinking I was done. Strangely, I find myself returning once a year, every year since launch, longing for more. Getting a big chain of creeps is so endlessly satisfying, and it doesn't help that each time I come back, there are more levels and modes. Grindstone, you've stolen this Harte's heart.

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

Why haven't you played Aperture Desk Job? It's free on Steam. It costs nothing but time and is basically a small sequel to Portal. It doesn't have portals in it, but it does have Portal characters, is canon, and important Portal Universe stuff takes place. It also features comedian Nate Bargatze whom I can confirm is a funny person. On multiple occasions, I have spoken with friends who want more Portal who haven't even heard of Aperture Desk Job. Valve designed it as a showcase for Steam Deck (and it is best played on Steam Deck), but it does not need to be played on Steam Deck. If you like Portal, play it. It's free.

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12 THE FUTURE OF RYU GA GOTOKU STUDIO

After a wave of high-profile departures and internal restructurings, it's a new era for Yakuza developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio. We visited the developer's office in Tokyo, Japan, interviewing the entire leadership team about what's next.

20 HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

Christmas is right around the corner. Don't get left out in the cold; read our buying guide for tips on gifts for your loved ones. Or, if you've been extra nice, for yourself.

32 COVER STORY – STREET FIGHTER 6

Bring it back to the streets. We flew to Osaka, Japan, to visit Capom's headquarters and play Street Fighter 6. Across two features and 20 pages, we've got the decades-long story behind this new king of fighters.

52 TCHIA

We traveled to New Caledonia to learn about Tchia as well as the cultures and lands that inspired this fascinating game's creation.

80 HOW VISUALS CHANGE STORYTELLING

No matter how faithful it may be, The Last of Us Part I shows there's no such thing as a completely faithful remake. Freelance critic Reid McCarter explains why.

regulars

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NINTENDO SWITCH
Games for me and the family. That's my way to play.
Pokémon Scarlet
Pokémon Violet
Splatoon 3
The Legend of Zelda Breath of the Wild
Minecraft
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
$24.99
Nintendo eShop
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe Booster Course Pass
Game Add-On
Add 48 more courses to the Mario Kart 8 Deluxe game.*
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*Full version of game required to use DLC. Purchase now and receive all courses as they release. Content will release in 6 waves of 8 courses until the end of 2023.
Additional games, systems, and/or accessories may be required for multiplayer mode. Games, systems, DLC and some accessories sold separately. Nintendo Switch Lite plays all games that support handheld mode.
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Replies

BAYONETTA 3

The first Bayonetta game had a good balance of story, gameplay, and (most importantly) onboarding. Is Bayonetta 3 going to be a return to form in this regard, or will it continue in the boss-rush-like style of Bayonetta 2?
– Anonymous via email

↳ *The onboarding is almost certainly more manageable than Bayonetta 2, given that the eponymous witch doesn't have access to her entire classic arsenal (like torture attacks) from the jump. While we didn't get a great sense of how the experience is balanced during our hands-on time with the last issue's cover story, you're in luck! We've played the entire game and rendered our final verdict! You can read our full review on p. 74.*

XBOX WITHOUT THE BOX?

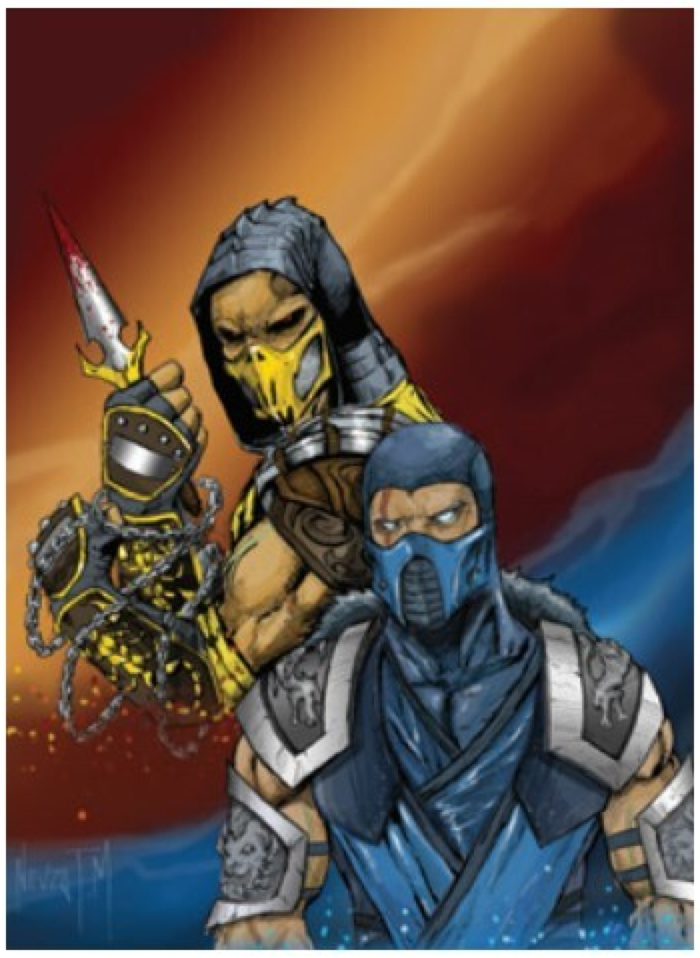
If Xbox continues to excel with its subscription-based model for great games, is it possible they stop creating hardware and come to the Switch and PlayStation?
– @b_spielbauer via Instagram

↳ *Following a terrible initial launch of the Xbox One, the team over at Microsoft's gaming division righted the ship. Phil Spencer, who became head of Xbox after the poor launch, has often spoken about breaking down the barriers and allowing more players to enjoy their games wherever they choose. We've seen this through how nearly every first-party Xbox title launches on both Xbox consoles and PC, with even some Xbox Game Studios games appearing on Switch (complete with achievement support). However, the fullest realization of this vision could well be Xbox Cloud Gaming, which lets you play Xbox and PC games remotely on anything that supports streaming – including smart TVs and mobile phones. It stands to reason that perhaps Xbox Cloud Gaming support could eventually arrive on rival consoles, but we don't anticipate Xbox consoles going anywhere anytime soon. Microsoft has put a ton of work into iterating its hardware and operating system, and being a platform holder lets Xbox enjoy various benefits.*

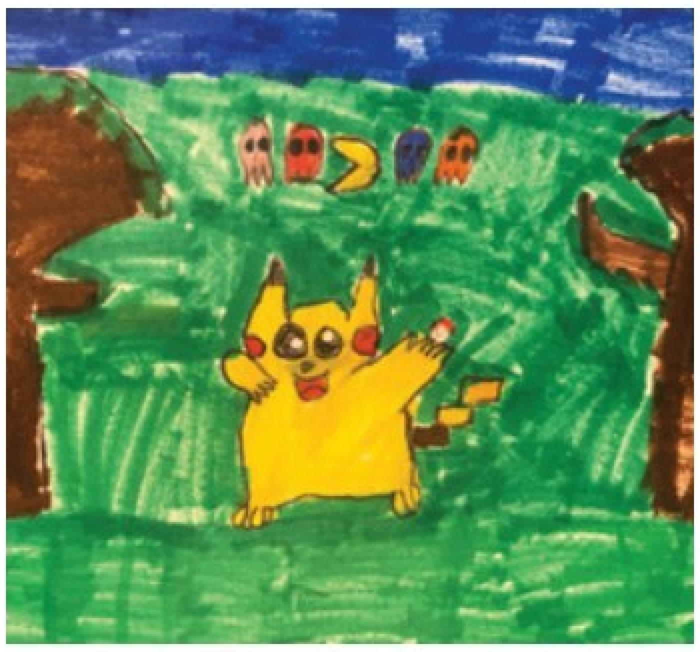
IT'S-A HIM!

Considering the Mario movie is next year, when and what do you want or expect from the next 3D Mario game? **– @jjpartyman2003 via Instagram**

↳ *It's been five years since we embarked on the superb Super Mario Odyssey, and I think it's safe to say we're all ready to learn what's next for Nintendo's mascot. Last year, we perhaps got a taste of the franchise's future through Bowser's Fury, a side game included in the Switch release of Super Mario 3D World. That title presented players with a small open-world experience in which Mario could move from one obstacle course to another without worrying about backing out into a hub world or transitioning through loading screens. We'd love to see that fun proof-of-concept make it into a full-fledged game. With The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom coming out in May, hopefully, we'll hear something about what's next for Mario around that timeframe.*



Reader art submission: Nevzat Mutlu



Reader art submission: Malachi Olmos-Camacho, age 7

Soundoff:

Have you ever caught yourself humming or whistling a song from a game in which you poured a ton of hours? Video games have long featured some of the best music of any entertainment medium, accentuated by the fact that we spend so much time in those worlds that we often become intimately familiar with the songs that play repeatedly. We asked our community which video game franchise has the best soundtrack. Here are some of their responses:

For the best video game soundtrack, I am definitely just going to throw out Persona 5 Royal. From the soothing and relaxing music of the LeBlanc to those awesome battle mixes "Last Surprise" a great one! **– Kody Gipson**

Best video game soundtrack? The Final Fantasy series, hands down. From "One-Winged Angel" to Zanarkand. From Terra's Theme to the Victory Fanfare. Each game has a banger soundtrack. So much so, that there's a very successful, very awesome concert that's been ongoing for years: Distant Worlds. I can't wait to see what we get from Final Fantasy XVI. The Metal Gear Solid, Legend of Zelda, and Persona series are very close seconds. **– LegendofGamer102**

The Elder Scrolls games all have pretty good soundtracks, but that of The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind deserves its own very high podium. It's a series of grand orchestral melodies with surprising emotional depth and an uncommon willingness to draw attention to themselves. They repeat themselves endlessly without ever getting old. Years after playing the game, just a few notes can instantly transport me to a rainy day by the canal in Balmora and make me wonder why I ever left that world. **– Robert Baribeau**

GTA, particularly San Andreas, Yakuza/Ryu Ga Gotoku, and Final Fantasy. In my opinion, the soundtracks for all those series have been consistent bangers. **– Bosscat**

This has to be the hardest question of all time!!! There can't just be one and I won't choose just one! Two main ones would be World of Warcraft and any Final Fantasy game, and two that have blown me away recently would be Godfall and Ever Oasis. Last but not least in the newest Paper Mario listen to M-A-X Power and you will be moving your hips like Forrest Gump! **– Jeremy Amacher**

READERS' TOP 10

We received so many responses to this question, we couldn't fit all of them in this section, so here are the top 10 most popular responses:

1. Sonic the Hedgehog
2. Final Fantasy
3. The Last of Us
4. The Legend of Zelda
5. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater
6. Doom
7. God of War
8. Persona
9. Grand Theft Auto
10. Halo

RECREATING BRILLIANCE

Could the Resident Evil 4 Remake really outperform the legacy that the original Resident Evil 4 made? In my opinion, it has its work cut out for it.
– @lyonks555 via Instagram

↳ *You're undoubtedly correct: Resident Evil 4 Remake has its work cut out. But when you consider how strong the Resident Evil series has been as of late – including the excellent remakes of RE2 and RE3 – it's not difficult or outlandish to imagine Capcom knocking it out of the park with its reimagining of Resident Evil 4. That said, Resident Evil 4 holds a particularly special place in the hearts of many gamers, so capturing that magic could be a taller order than remaking Resident Evil 2 or 3. However, until Capcom comes down from this hot streak it's been on with Resident Evil, we're happy to give them the benefit of the doubt.*

NERF GUNS AND SOUND SYSTEMS

I enjoyed your fall buying guide and its recommendations. I like the Sonos sound system as it is great for movies, just as you said. But it's also great for relaxed couch gaming on a console. Personally, my dad has a Sonos system in the family room because he loves movies, but when I have a chance to move my Xbox there for the day I jump at the chance. The sound system adds some of the qualities of a good gaming headset while keeping a relaxed gaming attitude. Also, I liked seeing the addition of a Nerf gun to your recommendations. However, from owning many Nerf guns in my time I'd suggest the nerf rival line. It's like the hyper line in that it uses balls as ammunition. However, its ammunition is larger and more squishy-hitting not as hard for battles and not bouncing as far (still a lot) making them easier to find. I'd suggest the Nerf Rival Helix, Kronos, and Takedown. Anyway, thanks for the article!
– Alex Farkas via email

↳ *Thanks for your recommendations on the Nerf line-up! We've certainly seen a wide variety of new options from that brand in recent years. Popping each other with cushy foam never seems to get old. And obviously, we agree with your (and your dad's) assessment of the Sonos audio system. It's a pretty slick and expandable setup for home theater and gaming. We're glad you enjoyed the fall guide. We spend a lot of time researching the items we recommend to our readers so that you can be confident in getting something fun and high quality, whether it's a gift or for yourself. We've got some new suggestions in our holiday guide on p. 20.*

↘
Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

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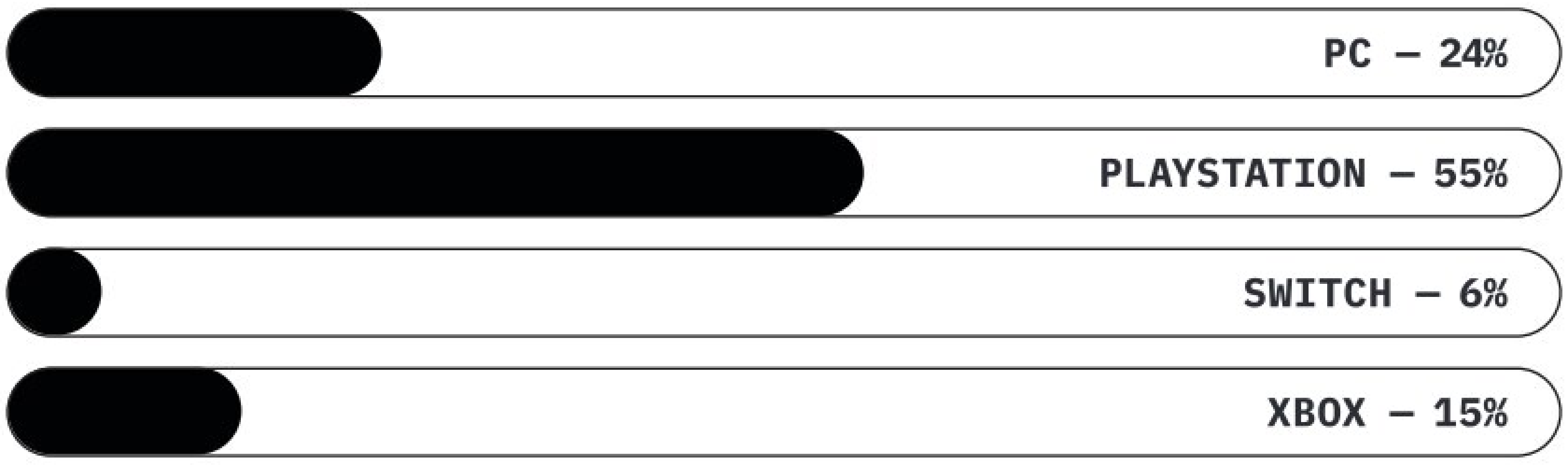
Poll: What is your current preferred gaming platform?



Poll conducted on Instagram

BUILDING CHARACTERS

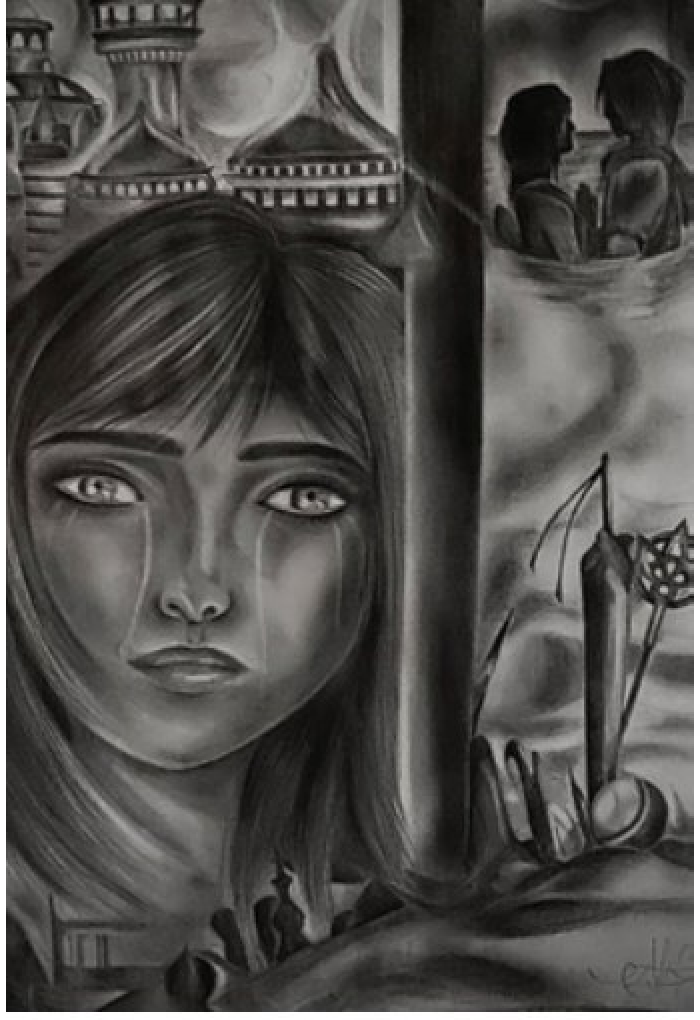
I recently finished playing Xenoblade Chronicles 3, and I was just amazed at how I cried at Chapter 5. It was like this for Chapter 1 of Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition and Chapter 10 of Xenoblade Chronicles 2. Even through the very beginning, the writers at Monolith Soft know how to make you feel connected to a character within minutes so you can really understand the pain and the happiness. I rarely cry at different media, so the fact that Xenoblade has made me cry so much is amazing. I find it such a shame that some people don't like to listen to stories and skip all of the amazing characters' journeys. **– Callum via email**

↳ ***For some, video games are simply a way to slash through some enemies and enjoy a lighthearted adventure. However, those who allow themselves to become invested in the story are often richly rewarded with some of the best storytelling of any media. Not only does the video game industry hold a massive amount of talent, but with some of these games holding your attention for tens, sometimes hundreds, of hours, players have an unrivaled amount of time to grow attached to these characters and their journeys. Add into the mix the level of immersion that comes from the nature of video games being interactive media, and you have a surefire recipe for narrative investment.***

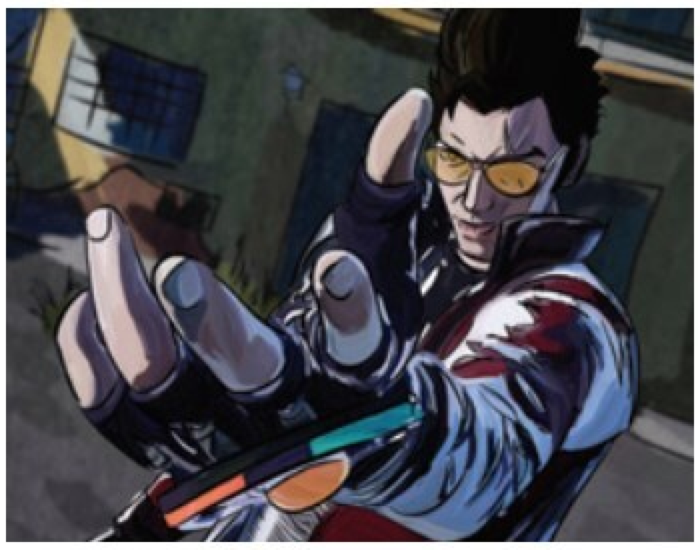
MARCHING TO YOUR OWN BEAT

I've seen nothing but negativity about the new Saints Row. I don't care what the haters say; you guys are spot-on in your review. I absolutely love it. I'm sure you've gotten lots of hate over it, but just know that at least one person understands that reviews are opinions. **– Drako Darkstar via email**

↳ ***Any time a long-established series tries to reboot with a new cast of characters and setting, it's bound to draw the ire of fans who grew attached to the previous conventions of the series. We had a great time visiting Santo Ileso alongside the new members of the Saints, but we also recognize that it's not for everyone. And yes, we certainly heard from some of our readers that they disagreed with our reviewer's assessment. At the end of the day, our job is to try to give you our unfiltered thoughts on a game. We recognize that we won't always match up with the consensus opinion, and that's okay. Sometimes, we may tell you why we love a game other people don't, and other times, it might be the other way around. We do our best to guide you towards games we think deserve your attention, and ultimately, what matters the most is not what people say you should or shouldn't enjoy on social media but rather what you actually enjoy yourself.***



Reader art submission: Kytalin Craner



Reader art submission: Roland McPhaden

LAYING IT ALL OUT

I loved "One Last Thing," located on pg. 84 of [Issue 349]. "The Season Ahead" perfectly laid out the upcoming games and their releases. I've already input several titles in my Google Calendar so I don't forget them. I haven't seen this in previous issues. Is this something that can be made permanent and grow into something larger in future issues? **– Steve Despot via email**

↳ ***Whenever the busy holiday gaming season begins ramping up, it's always helpful to take a step back and look at the releases on the horizon. We do it, our readers do, and sometimes, even developers do it. That's why we thought it would be helpful to include it in an issue that hit just before the chaos of the holiday release schedule. While we don't currently have plans to make it a feature in every issue, the response from our readers has clearly shown that it's a helpful feature. We plan on revisiting it every so often so people can plan out their gaming lives several months at a time. In the meantime, if you'd like a more up-to-date calendar, you can head to GameInformer.com/2022 and GameInformer.com/2023 for up-to-date release schedules for 2022 and 2023, respectively.***

GONE FISHIN'

I've got just one question for Ubisoft: Where the hell is Fisher?! Don't give me these cameos and crap in Ghost Recon. Give me (and millions of other fans) a standalone Splinter Cell game. At this point, we'd even settle for a remastered version of the original. One last question for Ubisoft: I've got money, why won't you take it???

– James Geiger, Cedar Falls, IA

↳ *Fear not! There is, in fact, a Splinter Cell remake in development right now. It was announced in December 2021 and is in development at Ubisoft Toronto, the studio behind Far Cry 6, Watch Dogs: Legion, and of course, Splinter Cell: Blacklist. We don't know much about the game aside from its being rewritten and updated "for a modern-day audience." Also, its director, David Grivel, recently announced he was leaving the studio, though it's unclear how this might affect the project.*

Nevertheless, your prayers have been answered – Sam's back. Or at least he will be, eventually.

PREMIUM PLAYSTATION

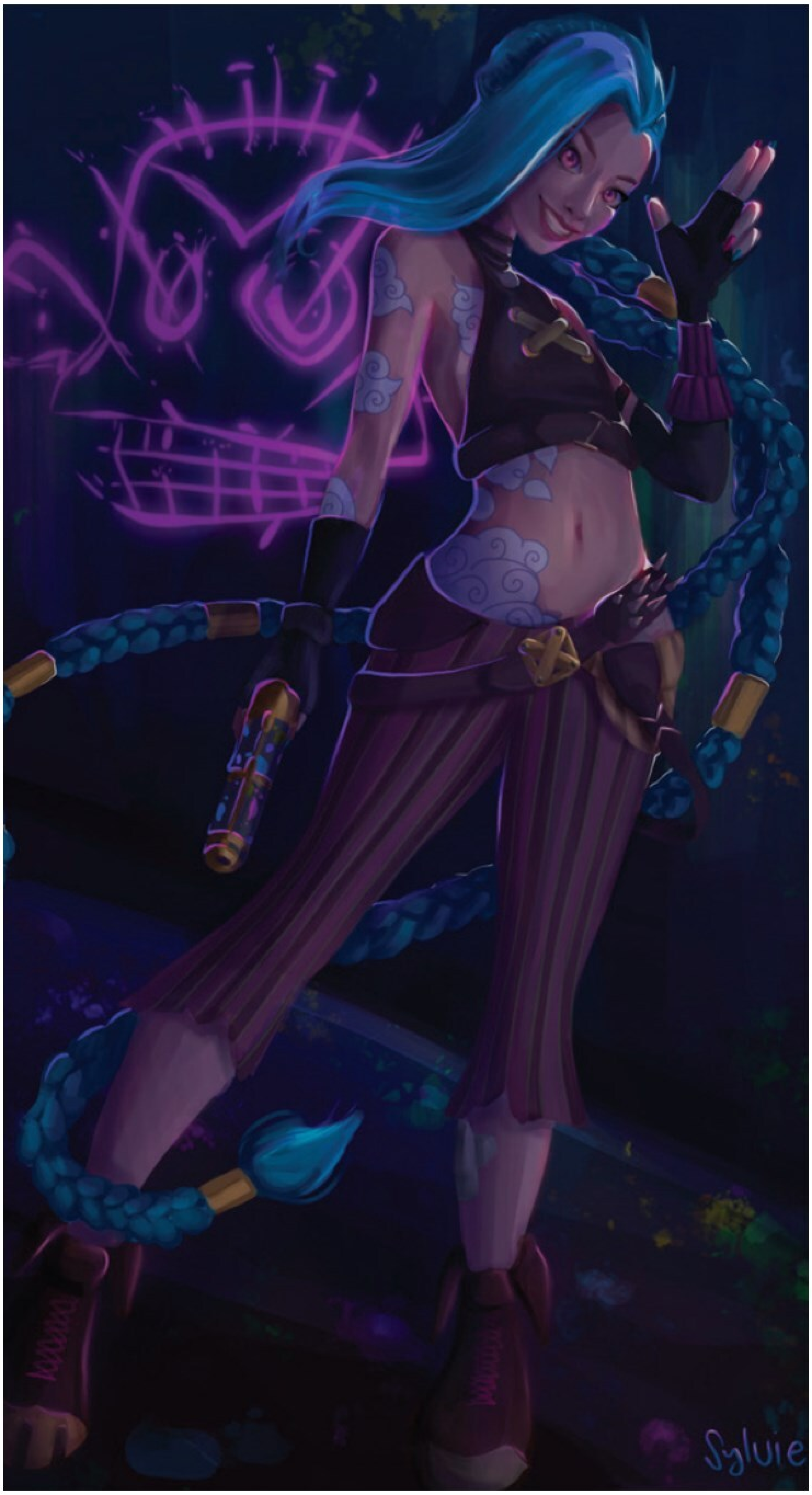
Do you think the new PlayStation Plus tiers could eventually become better than Xbox Game Pass?

– @olaoyeisikalu via Instagram

What is the future plan for PlayStation Plus? Will there be any triple-A games like Horizon Forbidden West in the PlayStation Plus Premium in the future?

– @ps_asg via Instagram

↳ *When PlayStation revamped its PS Plus subscriptions to include access to games stretching all the way back to the PS1 (depending on the tier you select), it inevitably drew comparisons to Xbox Game Pass. In some ways, PlayStation Plus compares favorably against Xbox's popular subscription service. However, in other ways, it falls short of what Xbox offers through Game Pass. Most notably, PlayStation has come out and said it does not plan to provide its triple-A first-party games on PlayStation Plus on day one. One of the major selling points of Game Pass is that you get all first-party Xbox games immediately upon release at no additional cost, but PlayStation feels including them in a subscription service lessens the value of the titles, and the result would be lower-quality experiences. While we aren't sure we entirely agree with that as a hard-and-fast rule, it's hard to argue with the quality of first-party PlayStation exclusives when they have franchises like God of War, Uncharted, Spider-Man, The Last of Us, Horizon, and more in its stable. And with such an incredible backlog to pull from, even if PlayStation doesn't put its big exclusives on PS Plus at launch, their inclusion down the road means the sky's the limit for PS Plus.* ■



Reader art winner: Sylvie Bechtold, age 14

↘ **Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!**

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

The Making of Mina the Hollower

How a secret side project became Yacht Club's next big game

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

ALEC FAULKNER IS A TALENTED up-and-coming game designer with Yacht Club Games, the developer and publisher behind the Shovel Knight series. He lives in a converted backyard garage in Los Angeles, California, a quaint sunlit studio decorated with retro gaming memorabilia and plants cultivated during isolation, where he is hard at work on Yacht Club's next big project, Mina the Hollower.

Before enrolling in the University of Southern California's game development program, he studied video editing at the school's film department. "I was really into editing, mostly because the pressure of being on a set and getting all of the footage in two weeks seemed crazy," Faulkner tells me while hand-grinding coffee beans for his morning cup. "And I prefer working on a project that can take a year or a few years; you have plenty of time to make sure it's all perfect. I guess that's the perfectionist in me, unable to work in a faster-paced environment."

After graduating from USC with a couple of game projects under his belt, Faulkner joined Yacht Club Games as an intern in 2016 to help bring Shovel Knight: Specter of Torment across the finish line.

Seven years later, he's directing the development of Mina The Hollower, the studio's first new 2D series since 2013. Surprisingly, Mina The Hollower was never supposed to be Yacht Club's next big game. Instead, it was Faulkner's secret side project – a small game he was developing to hone his art and programming skills in his free time. "I was really into Game Boy games at the time. I got a Game Boy flash cartridge and a nice backlit screen," Faulkner says. "I was playing a million games and thinking, 'This pixel art style is extremely appealing. It's very bizarre that nobody does anything with it.'"

He began creating Game Boy-inspired pixel art and posting it to social media for fun. Then he began programming, creating a simple top-down camera and a character capable of moving around an environment. Development continued on Faulkner's own time, and the top-down prototype, codenamed "Gothic," became good enough that his boss took notice. Now, nearly four years later, his side project has raised over $1.2M via crowdfunding and is the sole focus of the team he's leading at Yacht Club.

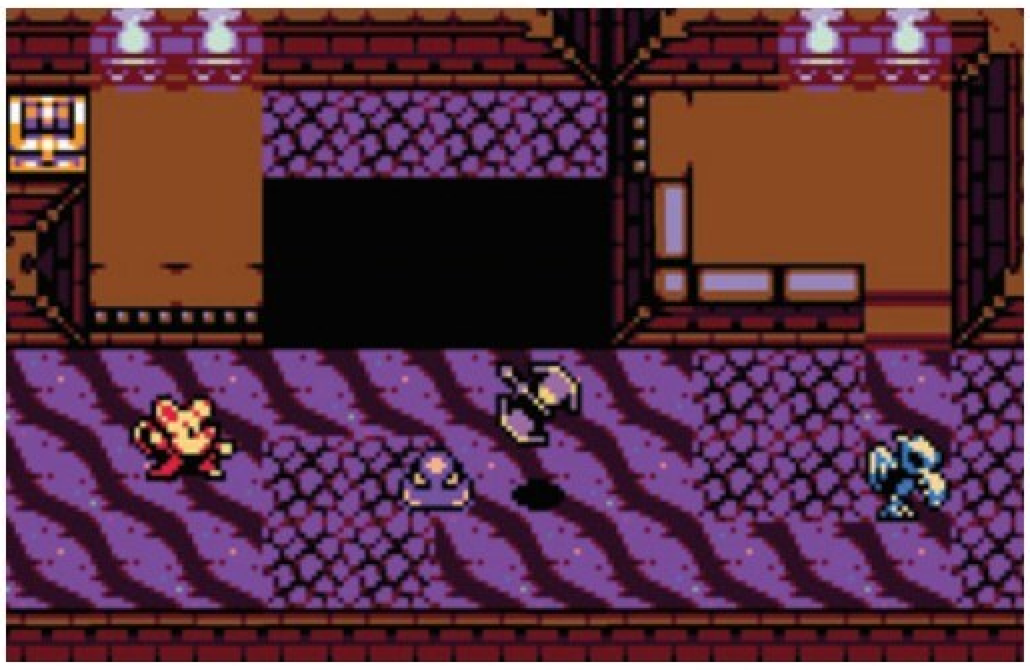
"When I first heard about Mina, I was really scared," Yacht Club founder and Shovel Knight director Sean Velasco recalls. "I thought, 'Oh, Jesus. Alec will leave the company and bring this game with him.' But sure enough, he said, 'No. Maybe we should do this next. Mina should be our next game.'" Shovel Knight is a medieval sidescrolling platformer, and Yacht Club wanted a new game that would pair well with it. "If Shovel Knight was our Mario, what would our Zelda be? And that's where Mina The Hollower fit the bill," Velasco said.

Mina The Hollower is a 2D action-adventure game about an inventive mouse studying the Earth and its underground as a Hollower, a pseudo-scientist capable of burrowing deep in the ground. Trying to rescue an island in peril, Mina uses Hollower abilities to dodge hazards, leap to far-off ledges, defeat bosses, and reach secret areas in the dungeons and overworlds she explores. She also wields a whip, keeping her distance while dismantling enemies in combat.

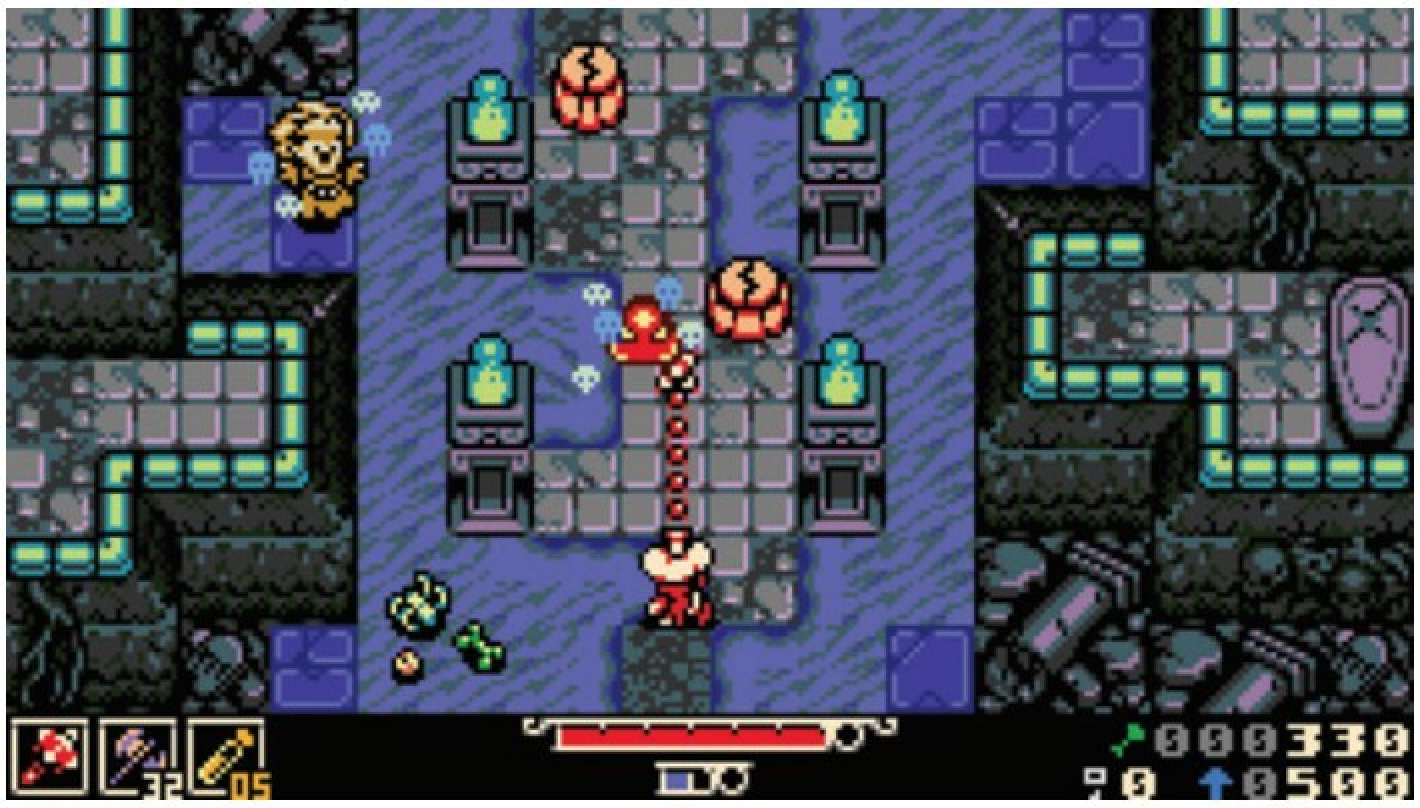
Like Shovel Knight, Faulkner's brainchild facilitates creativity through its retro-inspired limitations. Specifically, it abides by the Game Boy Color's technical specifications. For example, the game's 8-bit sprites only allow four colors per tile, and there aren't any 3D assets. According to Velasco and Faulkner, embracing limitations like these at a project's start establishes a strong foundation and sends development in a positive direction.

Faulkner had always envisioned making a small solo project, not a studio-backed commercial release. "Originally, Alec thought Mina The Hollower would be like Castlevania. Eight stages. Fairly linear. And you'd go from room to room, beat the bosses, and that would be it," Velasco says. "After making King of Cards and Shovel Knight Showdown – which were massive and overwrought – I think he just wanted a little palate cleanser. Unfortunately, that's not really what happened."

The scope of Mina The Hollower suddenly expanded, adding features like character upgrades, new weapons, and collectible trinkets. To ensure the successful development of a commercial release, the team would have to rebuild the game from scratch with a new engine. "Making a cool new franchise is absolutely what we should be doing, and I can see that now. But when we were planning the game in the beginning, I thought, 'Oh my God, this is going to be so much work. I'm so scared,'" Faulkner says. Luckily, he was up for the task.



↘ Top: A behind-the-scenes screenshot of the game's original prototype



"Sometimes I think about what [Mina] would have looked like if I kept this to myself and didn't bring it to Yacht Club, and it was just my little thing. And I think that would have been a disaster," he exclaims, holding back a laugh. "It feels like I should be worried about what happens if this game sucks. I'm going to have wasted everybody's time. But that's not a worry because everyone will catch me, and no one will let this game suck. No one would let me, even if I tried to make it suck. Everyone would identify the problems and make a plan to fix them. So I feel very blessed that I have so many people I can trust to hold me accountable, hold the project accountable, and keep everything running smoothly." ■

THE BIG PICTURE

This feature uses interview excerpts from *Making Mina*, a documentary series about the making of Yacht Club's next big game. Filmed and directed by Alex Van Aken, the three-part video series features a day in the life of working at Yacht Club Games, the never-before-seen prototype of Mina The Hollower, an exclusive look at developer Alec Faulkner's level design process, how Yacht Club Games designs a Shovel Knight level, and so much more.

Watch it all for free beginning November 21 at YouTube.com/GameInformer

NEW BATTLES

New Era

Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

Exclusive access to the leads behind the Like A Dragon series **BY BLAKE HESTER**

It's September 13, and **Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio** is just over 24 hours away from revealing its big plans for the future.

It'll be a night of celebrities, game announcements, and an infamous afterparty full of alcohol, confetti, and blaring music. It'll take over Twitter, and leave more than a few people nursing headaches the following day.

But today, instead of focusing on his big night, studio head Masayoshi Yokoyama is sitting in a conference room talking about why he loves *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

"If you watch a VHS tape enough times, the [plastic tape] inside will start ripping, and then you won't be able to see it anymore," he says. "But if you actually just take tape and tape it back up, it'll work again. I watched my *Evangelion* VHS tape and had to repair it three or four times."

Yokoyama is flanked on his left and right by the six heads of Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio (RGG), each leading a different department and discipline. I'm sitting opposite at a long conference table at RGG's office in Tokyo, Japan. We're all here to talk about the future but are admittedly side-tracked. We should be talking about the Yakuza series, especially now that it's more popular globally than ever. We should also be talking about the fact Yokoyama only recently took his title as head of the studio, and some very high-profile departures made that possible. And we will. But before that, Yokoyama wants to talk about his biggest influence.

"It's this manga called *Oishinbo*," he says, making the room laugh in surprise. "It's a manga about food. It's a food thing. Essentially, for me, the Ryu Ga Gotoku [Yakuza] series is probably like *Oishinbo*, the Yakuza version. I read it the most as a kid; I would just read it over and over. Every week there's basically a new, 'This is how you make food.' So, probably that, but Yakuza?"

There's confidence in the way the RGG staff speaks. It could be mistaken for cockiness – and perhaps is, to a degree. But in its defense, especially in the last few years, RGG has the games and sales to back up that confidence. Things might be changing around here, but the team is still laser-focused on its long-running crime series. There's time to let conversations go off-topic because, as far as the seven leads are concerned, no matter what's changed or what will change, it's still business as usual. Even if it isn't, really.

Saving Face

In October 2021, RGG lost its face. Kind of. It depends on who you ask.

Since its inception, Toshihiro Nagoshi – a then-30-year veteran of parent company Sega – had been the recognizable founder and head of RGG. He often spoke for the series and studio in interviews, especially outside of Japan. When people think about the Yakuza series, there's a good chance they also think of Nagoshi. Despite his age, it didn't hurt that he was also always ahead of the curve regarding fashion and trends. It was a common sentiment to say he looked like a character from his games.

But he left, as did several high-ranking members of RGG's staff. Nagoshi, Yakuza series producer Daisuke Sato, Judgment producer Kazuki Hosokawa, and half a dozen other Sega and RGG employees left to form Nagoshi Studio, funded by NetEase. In their absence, Yokoyama, with the series since the beginning, stepped up, now officially serving as RGG studio director and executive producer.

Largescale and high-profile departures can often look like trouble for a developer. And in the case of RGG, Nagoshi's departure came during the height of the Yakuza series' global popularity – beginning with 2017's hit Yakuza 0, and reaching a fever-pitch with 2020's Yakuza: Like A Dragon. It was shocking to see the series' most recognizable face leaving as soon as it really found its wider audience.

But as Yokoyama tells it, it wasn't such a shock internally. In fact, it was a slow process, and he pushes back on the idea that there was one sole face of RGG.

"We never actually really intended or thought that Nagoshi-san was the face of the company," he admits. "We all thought that we were also coming out and speaking and being part of it as well."

This is true to some degree – especially in Japan; himself, Yakuza series chief director Ryosuke Horii, and Yakuza series chief producer Hiroyuki Sakamoto have given tons of interviews and appeared at events over the years. But still, the remaining team knew how Nagoshi and Sato leaving would look from the outside. So, alongside announcing their departure, Yokoyama released a lengthy message about the studio's future. And most importantly, RGG released cool photos of the seven department heads – again, looking pretty similar to the characters in their own games. You can see them throughout this feature.

"I was very happy that they took a picture of me looking cool," Horii says.

"I'm really embarrassed about it," Yokoyama adds, laughing. "Initially, it took us a lot of courage to go with this. Because we're not celebrities. We're not people who, like, our job is to look really nice for the camera. So, it did take a lot of courage for us to do this."

As they tell it, releasing a picture as dramatic and slick alongside what could otherwise be seen as bad news was to give people something to look forward to; they wanted fans to see this as a positive change for RGG. The reaction, they say, has been better than expected. Anecdotally, I agree; I didn't see many negative responses to the internal shake-up when it was announced. RGG's bosses also seem to think so.

"Even the higher-ups at the company were like, 'Hey, wow. That's actually looking pretty good,'" Yokoyama says. "That's why we took this picture – we wanted people to think that way."

As far as I can tell, no one left on particularly bad terms, and in fact, days after our interview, Nagoshi tweeted about how much he liked RGG's announcements from the week. But it does mean new people get opportunities within the studio. And that, as far as Horii is concerned, is a positive change.

MASAYOSHI YOKOYAMA
Director of Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio and Executive Producer

TAKAYUKI SORIMACHI
Animation Director

DAISUKE FUKAGAWA
Visual Design and Cutscene Director

YUTAKA ITO
Technical Manager

"Obviously, Nagoshi-san and Sato-san leaving means that new people get to rise to the top, and we have new leaders emerging," he says. "I think overall; it's not that everything up until now was bad, and we want to change it. Basically, it just means it's good to have new voices coming in. We're not going to be making any major changes in terms of our [studio's] values or directions. We think it's a good amount of change that new people are getting exposed."

One shift the studio can speak to now is the amount of non-Japanese working at RGG. As Yokoyama tells it, its workforce has many employees from all over Asia. He hopes to continue this trend, creating a more multicultural studio. He says he imagines a scenario where we're sitting in this same room in the future, and there are heads of the studio that aren't from Japan.

And the working conditions for those new employees are supposedly better than at the beginning of RGG. Yokoyama compares the company's early schedule to those of night hosts; they'd come to work in the middle of the night and go home in the middle of the morning.

"Now, we're all living very healthy, responsible [lives]," he says, laughing. "We come in at, like, 8:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m. [...] We all got married; we had kids."

That work-life balance is something the studio heads claim they try and pass down to their employees, too. So long as the games get made.

"As leaders, we want people to maintain healthy lives," Yokoyama continues. "But all of our development team is relatively free to decide when they want to come in and when they want to leave. Though our development cycle is quite fast, we make sure that everybody who is working on our games can maintain the lifecycle that they want to. And if something doesn't turn out well, we'll go back to the drawing board and we'll remake it and keep doing things over again. We think we're craftsmen in that sense. Generally, because of that, we don't want to make a rule, like, 'You have to be at work from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We're saying, 'You can do what you want. Just get your job done.'"

We didn't get to talk to any RGG employees beyond the leads of the studio to ask about their work schedules. But if what Yokoyama says is true, it's a refreshing take from the head of a game developer – especially one as prolific as RGG, which often releases a game a year and is about to announce three in one day.

THE CHANGING FACE OF JAPAN

Though it's had many open worlds over the years, the most prominent in the Yakuza series is Kamurocho, based on Tokyo's Kabukicho redlight district. The series takes place in the modern day, meaning if you play the first game, the world will look drastically different than the most recent as it's changed to reflect modern times. Which is an immense amount of work, but one Yakuza series art director Nobuaki Mitake says is worth it.

"In terms of representing the world of Kamurocho in the games, our goal was to represent what Japan looks like today. When we made the first game, for example, there were no video screens. There were no animated ad screens around anywhere. Now that there are, we have to put in the effort, and we have to make those and recreate those. It's a lot of effort. Rather than, 'Darn, they changed something; we have to change them now in our games.' It's more like, 'We hope people notice the amount of work and effort we're pouring into this game to represent what Japan is looking like now.'"

Brawler
3rd
エレガント
NIPPON GINKO
10000 YEN

That Settles That

Horii's life's work is not the Yakuza series. It's karaoke. And he has the stats to prove it.

Horii keeps a spreadsheet of all the songs he can sing at karaoke. Once a year, he prints out the most up-to-date version and carries it around with him. Figuring he might need it today, he printed out a new one just in case. When he hands it over, I look over the meticulous details, spread across a staggering 7,964 songs.

Growing up, Horii was a massive Sega fan. He even owns eight Sega Saturns – a fact he proudly proclaimed during his job interview all those years back. But karaoke arguably got him into the door and helped him rise the ranks.

"[During my job interview] they asked me about myself. I said, 'My hobby is karaoke,'" Horii told *Denfaminicogamer* in 2018 (translation via Carrie Williams). "When I had the final interview with Nagoshi, he said, 'A lot of guys have karaoke as a hobby,' which is, of course, true. So I had to find some way of showing him, 'I'm not like those other guys.'

"So I showed him my karaoke list I showed you before, saying, 'Other guys don't do this,' with a bit of a smile, and I was offered the job."

For a long time, Horii worked on side content in the Yakuza games. In the samurai-themed, Japan-only spinoff Yakuza: Kenzan he created the waterfall training rhythm-based minigame, which steered him to leading Yakuza 3's karaoke minigame. A perfect professional circle if there ever was one, but one with hardship. Initially, he says coworkers criticized him for going too far with the minigame – at the time, it was uncharacteristic to have the generally-stoic protagonist, Kiryu, doing something so goofy. But his instincts proved correct; it became one of the most popular features in the Yakuza series and went a long way in humanizing Kiryu.

These days, Horii is probably most well-known for directing Yakuza: Like A Dragon – a radical departure for the series, trading its signature brawler combat for turn-based RPG action. Now he's directing its sequel.

Horii highlights how RGG trusts its employees to experiment or alter the series' formula, taking it in radically different directions than previous games. Which is a defining trait of the series' biggest entries, Yakuza 0 and Yakuza: Like A Dragon. The former is a prequel, taking the story all the way back to the '80s during Japan's economic miracle. It reimagines characters and tells the background stories behind how they became who they are in modern games. The latter introduces a new cast of characters, story themes, and the aforementioned play style.

RYOSUKE HORII
Yakuza series
Chief Director

HIROYUKI SAKAMOTO
Yakuza series
Chief Producer

NOBUAKI MITAKE
Yakuza series
Art Director

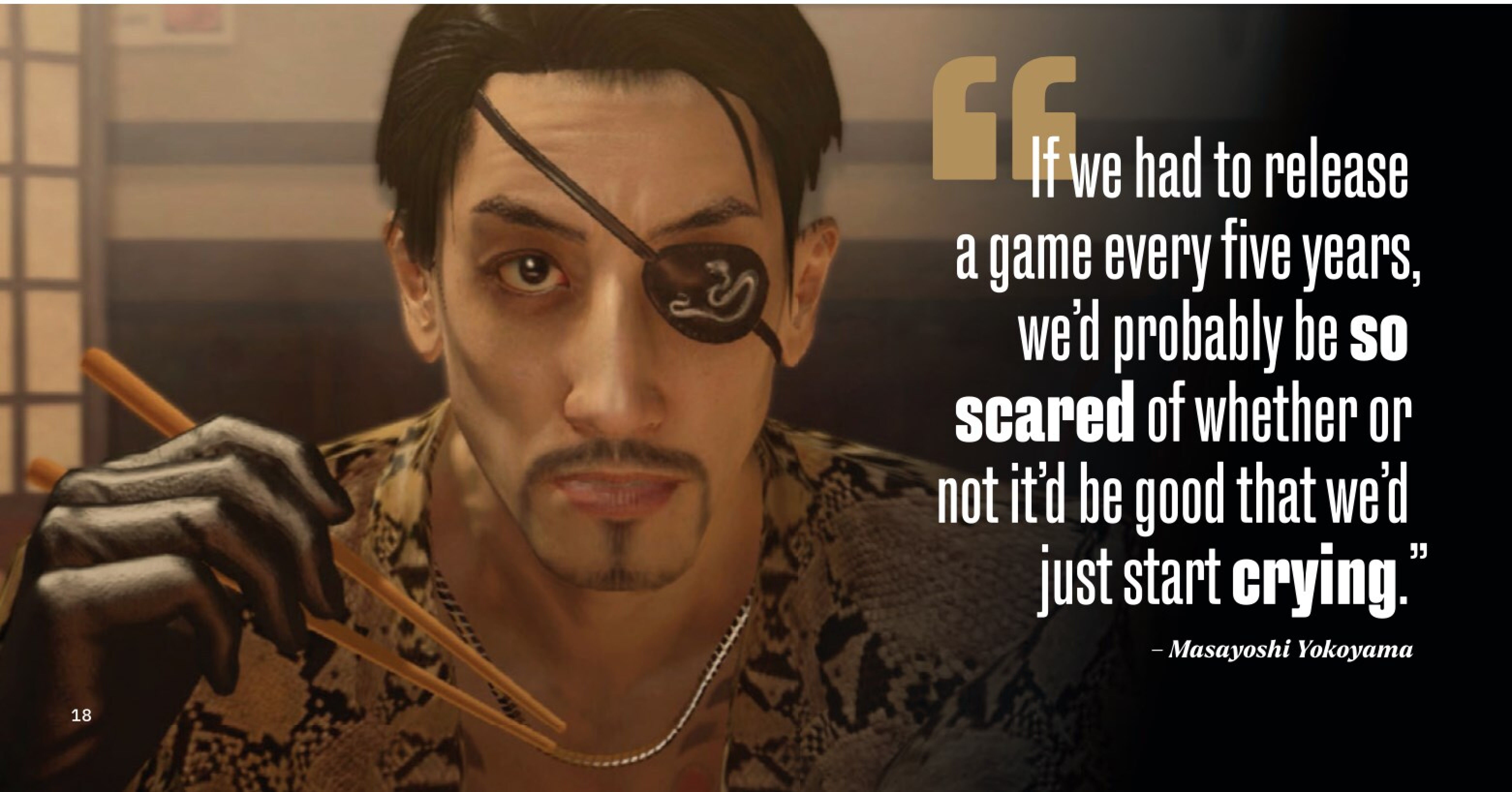
MONEY ¥2,770,927,662

From RGG's perspective, the success of these two games comes down to a few key points. The first is Yakuza 0's localization. Historically, the series had never received heavy localization efforts; especially as the series went on and western success seemed like it wasn't ever going to happen. Yakuza 0 proved that assumption wrong.

As told by Yokoyama, the second reason was both games were good entry points into the long-running series; it invited people who were curious about the Yakuza games, but didn't have a good jumping on point. In fact, to drive that point home, in the west, Yakuza: Like A Dragon dropped the number convention. In Japan, it's still Ryu Ga Gotoku 7.

These two games helped transform the series into something of a phenomenon worldwide, and there's no shortage of games for that massive influx of fans. In total, there are 19 different Yakuza games, including mainline and spin-offs, all released nearly yearly since its debut in 2005. Since the series took off in 2017, seven of those games have been released worldwide (this includes some released in Japan before 2017). This doesn't include other RGG-developed games such as Binary Domain, Super Monkey Ball, and Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise.

But RGG isn't slowing down. The day after our interview, during a Like A Dragon event, the studio announces a remake of the once-Japan-only Like A Dragon: Ishin to be released in 2023, Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name for the



> "If we had to release a game every five years, we'd probably be **so scared** of whether or not it'd be good that we'd just start **crying**."
>
> *– Masayoshi Yokoyama*

same year, and the long-awaited Like A Dragon 8 for 2024. RGG caps the night off with a massive after-party to celebrate the news. It's also worth pointing out: the studio officially changed the series' name worldwide to match its Japanese name – and reflect the declining prevalence of the Yakuza both in the fiction and the real world. The Yakuza series is now the Like A Dragon series.

The name change highlights a few key points. One is that RGG isn't afraid to rebrand its cash cow at the height of its global popularity and recognizability. Two, especially compared to other annualized series like Call of Duty, which despite their continued immense success are plagued by conversations about "franchise fatigue," people still seem more than eager to devour RGG's games. When asked why the team thinks that is, Sakamoto quickly answers.

"In the end, people play our games, and they see the quality is there and the games are still fun," he says. "So, I think that kind of settles the question."

Yokoyama offers a different perspective.

"If you look back five years, we've changed; the world has changed," he says. "So, if we've been working on a game for five years and it comes out, it's going to be not matching who we are today. So, in that sense, we want to move quickly and get a game out more often. If we had to release a game every five years, we'd probably be so scared of whether or not it'd be good that we'd just start crying."

But even if it's always experimenting, according to these seven, it's business as usual. They're here to make video games the way they want to make them. And the continued popularity of the Yakuza series around the globe hasn't changed that fact.

"Just like you write articles, we make Yakuza games," Yokoyama says. "That's our daily lives. For us, whether or not we have a strange feeling about it? Not really. We're continuing doing what we're always doing."

"Yeah, things just haven't changed here," Horii adds. "We just make what we think will be fun."

"Maybe it's an American picture," Yokoyama says. "But from us, we notice, 'Oh hey, look. Looks like profit numbers in the U.S. are up a little bit. We're selling a little bit more; that's cool.' I guess we're being interviewed now here. So maybe that's like, 'Oh, people are noticing us more.'"

It's a little confusing; RGG both says things around the studio feel the same yet offers numerous examples of how it's changed. Maybe when you're in it, you can't always identify what around you is different until you zoom out with a 50-foot lens. Or until a reporter asks. But nevertheless, time marches on. Maybe in another 10 years, things will still feel the same as they do now for the people remaining at RGG. And maybe when they take a second to see the bigger picture, they'll notice how much has changed.

BUCK-TICK

Yakuza series chief director Ryosuke Horii's life is defined by music. His favorite band is Buck-Tick, a Japanese rock band active since the early '80s. Their music saved him, he says, and it's become his biggest influence.

"There was a Buck-Tick album called *Six/Nine* that I absolutely love," Horii says. "It's this really dark album that I listened to when I was in middle school. And when I was in middle school, I was really sad and dark. I was probably an angsty teenager type. For me, that music really saved me. [I] would just listen to it all the time – for a year on end. I was like, 'Oh man, I have no friends. Everything's sad. I want to make something like this.' And that kind of helped rescue me from that."

"Just like Buck-Tick saved me when I was younger, I want to be able to make content – right now it's games, not music – that helps save people," he adds. " I don't think I'm there yet. They're kind of the pinnacle, and I don't think I'll ever be able to succeed them. But I still want to reach to do that. That's helping motivate me to keep going."

Natural

Yokoyama asks Sakamoto to take out his business card so he can show us something. As he points out, the studio isn't actually called Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio. It's Sega's First Development Division. RGG is just a nickname, he says.

But no matter what you call it, the studio is best known for its Yakuza (Like A Dragon) series. Maybe one day that won't always be the case.

"We have lots of other not-announced titles," Yokoyama says. "Things outside of the same Ryu Ga Gotoku universe that we're working on."

Things will change; they always do. In 10 years, none of these men may still be working here. Or maybe all of them will, but they'll be joined by seven other developers all rising into leadership positions, taking the studio in wildly different directions.

From the outside, maybe it seemed drastic that Nagoshi left. But for Yokoyama, this is just what happens. It'll happen again, probably. He says he's bad at envisioning the future, but change isn't bad. It's just how things work out.

"All these members here have been doing this same job together for over 10 years," Yokoyama says about the team around him. "We knew that one day a split would come and somebody would end up leaving and doing something else. I think that's a natural thing. This is when the first split happened. At some point in the future, it might happen again. [Someone else] might leave to do something that they want to do."

He reiterates one more time, "Things naturally come about." ■

↘
Special thanks:
Kaydie Hansen (Sega coordinator) and Gavin Greene (Translation)

Holiday Buying Guide

2022

The holiday season is upon us, and with it comes the need to track down great gifts for the people you love. Or perhaps amid all that shopping you're doing for everyone else, you want to pick something special just for you. Either way, we've curated a selection of some of the products that most impressed us this year. From new ways to charge a controller to centerpiece gaming tables for your home, here's hoping you find something that excites you. Happy holidays!

by Matt Miller

Toys & Collectibles

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

❶ Mega Masters of the Universe Snake Mountain

After a stellar buildable recreation of Castle Grayskull from a couple of years back, Mattel's Mega brand has prepared another awesome take on a classic Masters of the Universe playset. As Skeletor's headquarters, Snake Mountain sits in the Dark Hemisphere of Eternia, from which the villainous leader hatches no end of dastardly plans to foil He-Man. The buildable version is 24 inches wide when opened up, but can fold close for preferred display options. Fun interactive options like a movable demon jaw and breakaway escape wall offer plenty of play options. The building set is big, creepy, and filled with dark imagery, just as it should be.

$321 | *creations.mattel.com*

❷ Jurassic World Dominion Tyrannosaurus Rex

For fans of the *Jurassic* movies, it's become a thrill to see how that good old original T-Rex manages to live to fight another day. In the toy world, each new installment brings a new variation on the familiar towering monster.

The latest iteration is a ton of fun. The 21-inch-long figure is suitably massive and features a hinging jaw that can swallow your brother's 3.75-inch figures whole, dropping them into an internal stomach to only be released (by lifting the tail) once he promises to stop bothering you.

$50 | *shop.mattel.com*

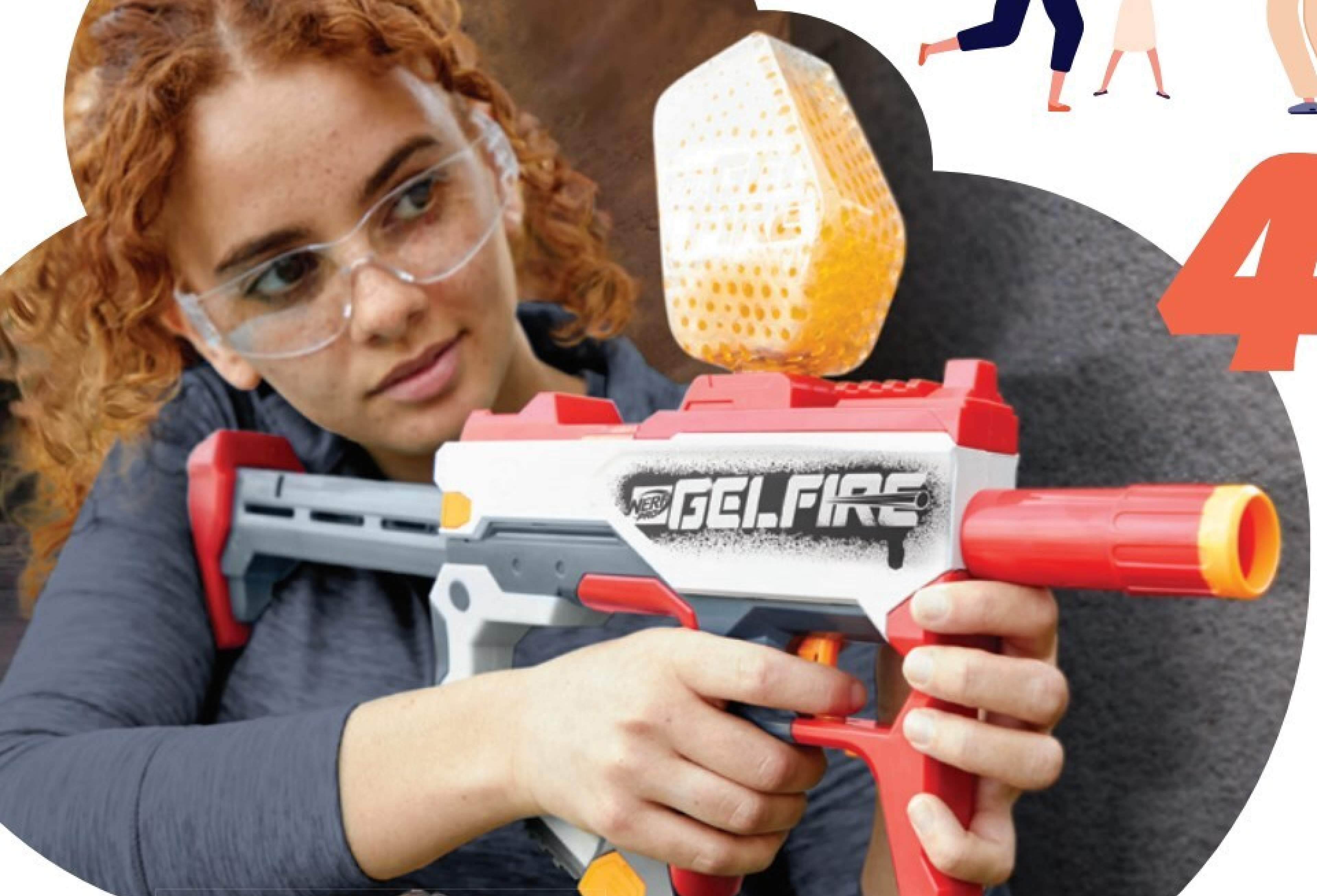
❸ Lego Atari 2600

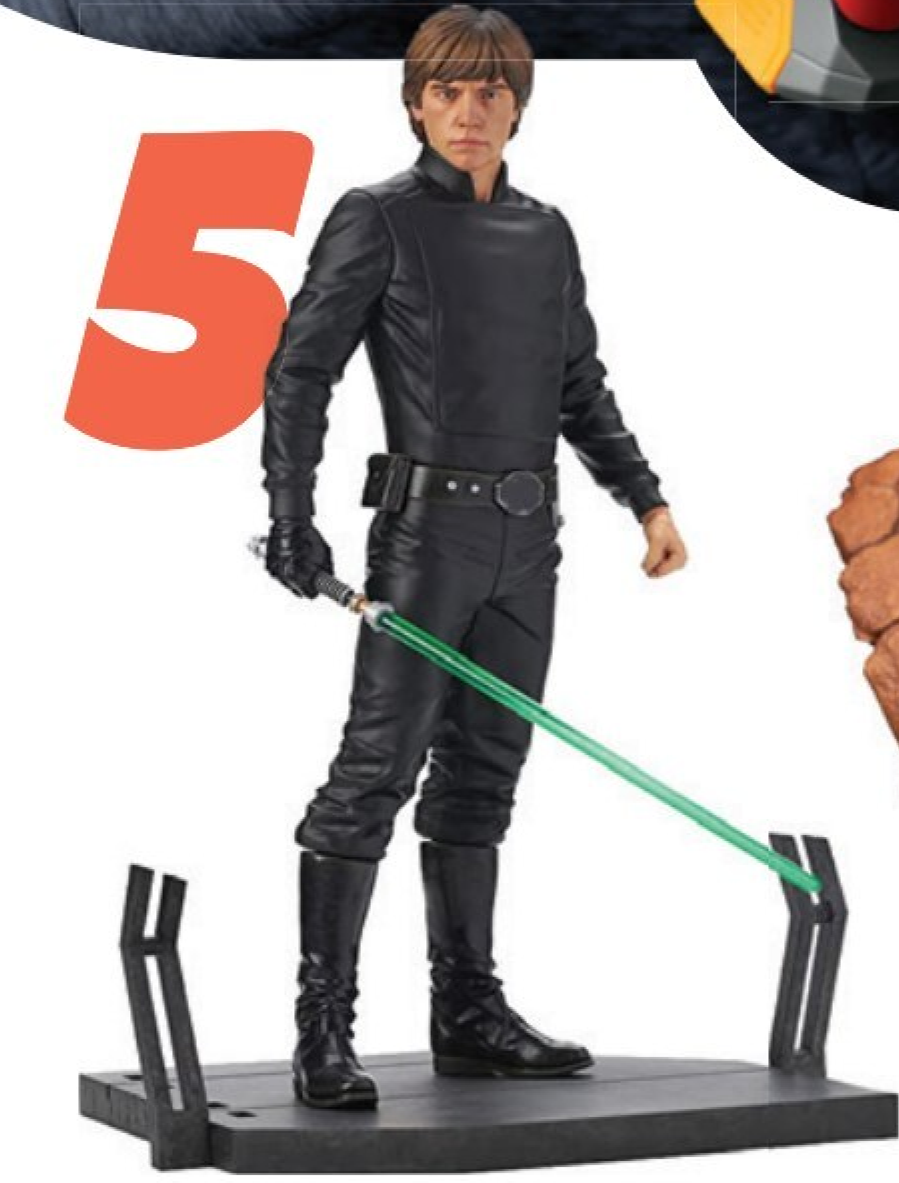
Lego has done much to embrace its nostalgic throwback potential in recent years, but few sets so typify the trend as this detailed build of the Atari 2600. A defining platform for a generation of early game players, the Atari paved the way for later success stories like NES and Genesis. The Lego version features functional switches and a remarkably accurate and moving version of the old joystick. Buildable cartridges for three of the best original games – Asteroids, Adventure, and Centipede – can be pushed into the console's slot or stored away in a vintage-style tower. Or display them with built vignettes of the game's action.

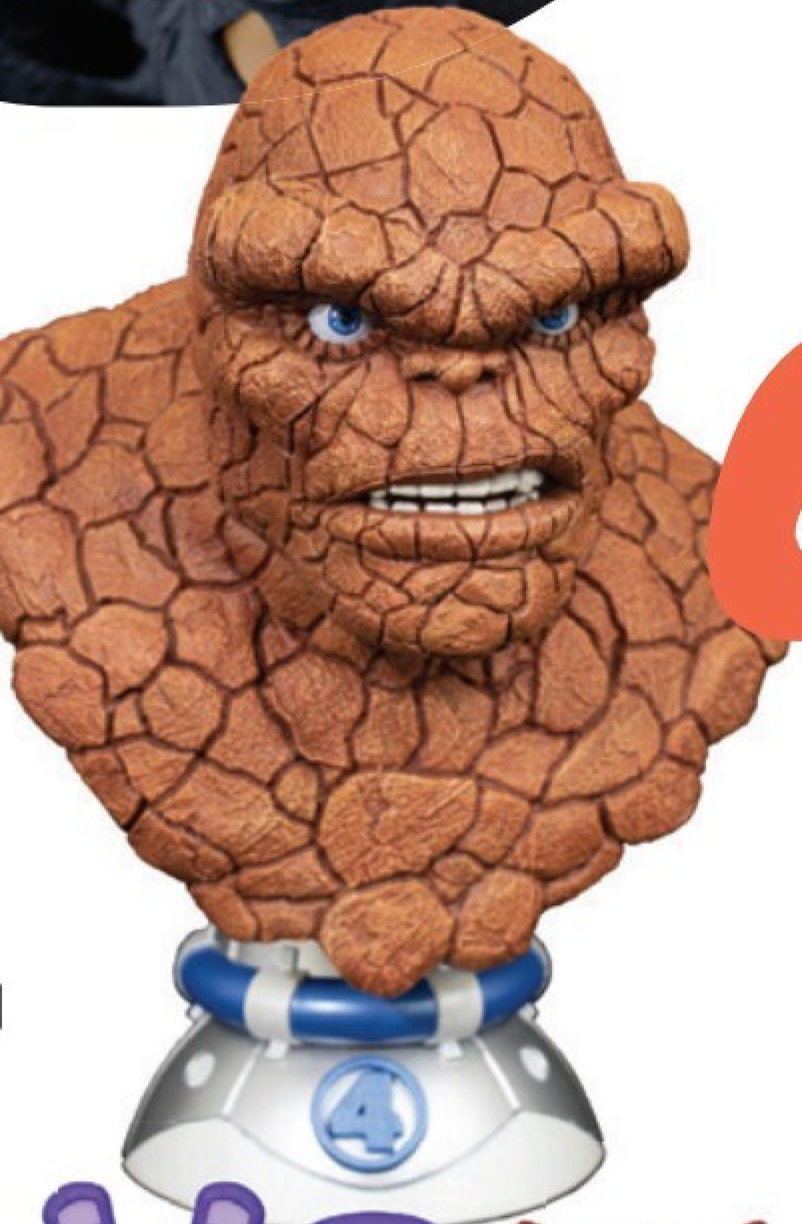
Our recommendation? Build the Lego set with the kids, then dig through your closet and find your original console and work together to get it up and running again.

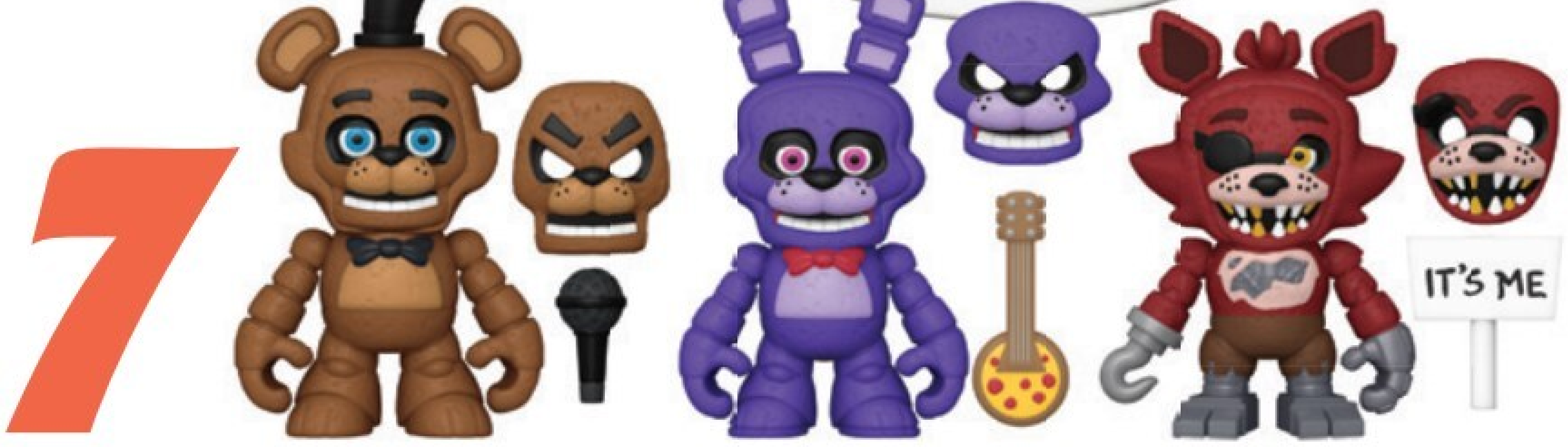
$239 | *lego.com*

Toys & Collectibles









❹ Nerf Pro Gelfire Mythic Full Auto Blaster

Nerf is branching out from its foam roots and embracing the burgeoning gel ball play experience. The sleek Mythic fires in semi-auto or full-auto modes, and comes with 10,000 dehydrated rounds alongside some essential protective eyewear. Ammo (once submerged for four hours) consists of small water-soaked globes that burst on impact. The gel balls feed into the blaster from a hopper that sits up top, and then out at your target at roughly 10 rounds-per-second. It's like the natural evolution of water fights when you're ready to upgrade from balloons and sprays. The Mythic is a fun twist on the standard Nerf experience but take special note of the age range here (14+) – this is a blaster for older enthusiasts, not younger newcomers.

$80 | *nerf.hasbro.com*

❺ Luke Skywalker Milestones Statue

This roughly 12-inch-tall rendition of Luke Skywalker finds him ready to confront his destiny and his father in the lynchpin conflict of the entire saga. Primarily black collectibles can be hard to pull off without appearing to be a blot on the shelf, but Gentle Giant's paint and design add wrinkles and folds to the hero's iconic outfit from *Return of the Jedi*, helping light to bounce in pleasing ways. The added pop of the green lightsaber completes the silhouette, making this one of the more evocative takes on a character who has been sculpted dozens of times.

$250 | *gentlegiant.com*

❻ Thing 1/2 Scale Bust

The clobbering man himself makes for a lovely warden for your shelf in this high-end collectible. Continuing Diamond Select's long line of half-scale busts, Ben Grimm's iconic visage is wonderfully captured here, with piercing blue eyes behind a raised forehead ridge. The most impressive work on the piece is only apparent up close, where the varied texture of his skin sets the 10-inch-tall display apart.

$199 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

❼ Funko Five Nights At Freddy's Snaps!

Funko's new Snaps! figures line aims to offer a bit more playability and customization than the well-known Pop! characters, and the creepy leads from FNAF are helping lead that charge. Change out torsos, legs, headpiece, and multiple faces to make each their own. Freddy, Foxy, Baby, and Bonnie are all on offer in the initial wave, as well as playsets adding an additional layer of fun.

$9 | *funko.com*

Media Shelf

Watch

BLU-RAY™ + DVD + DIGITAL CODE
COLLECTOR'S EDITION
JORDAN PEELE
KALUUYA PALMER YEUN
NOPE

Nope
$23
nope.movie

BLU-RAY + DIGITAL CODE
THOR
LOVE AND THUNDER

Thor: Love and Thunder
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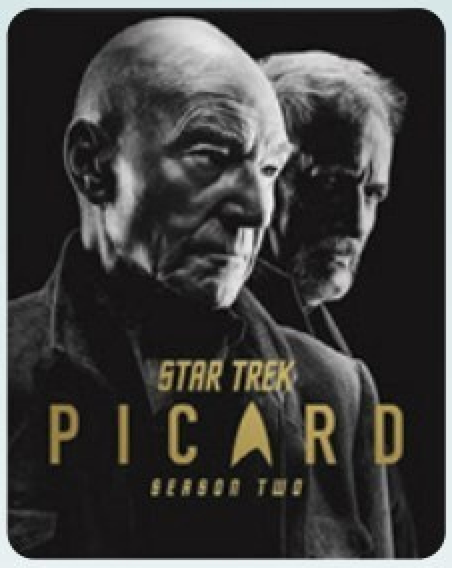
movies.disney.com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startrek.com

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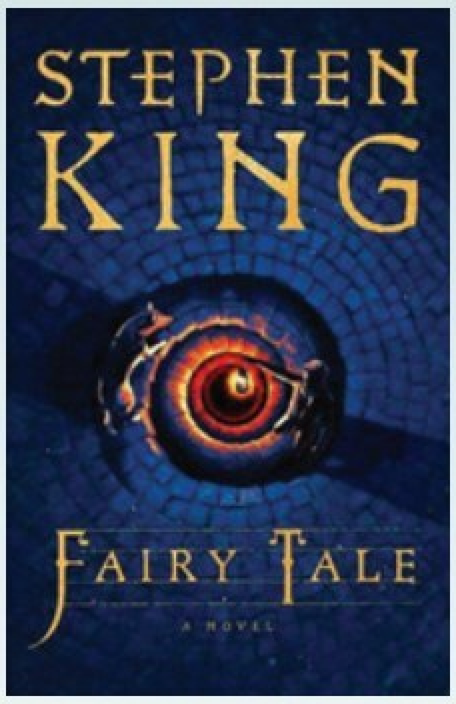
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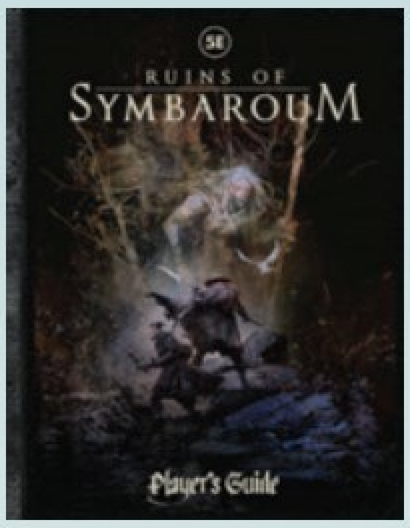
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Transformers Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook
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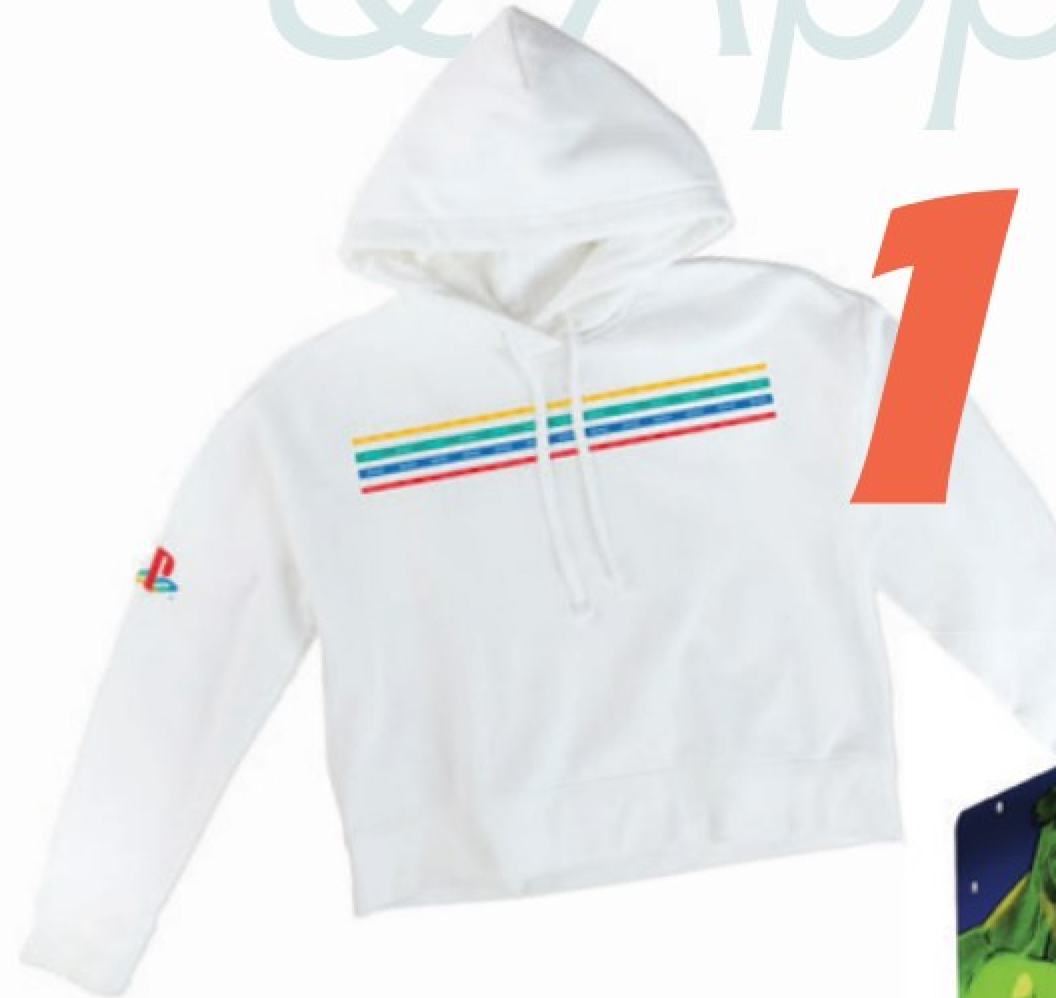

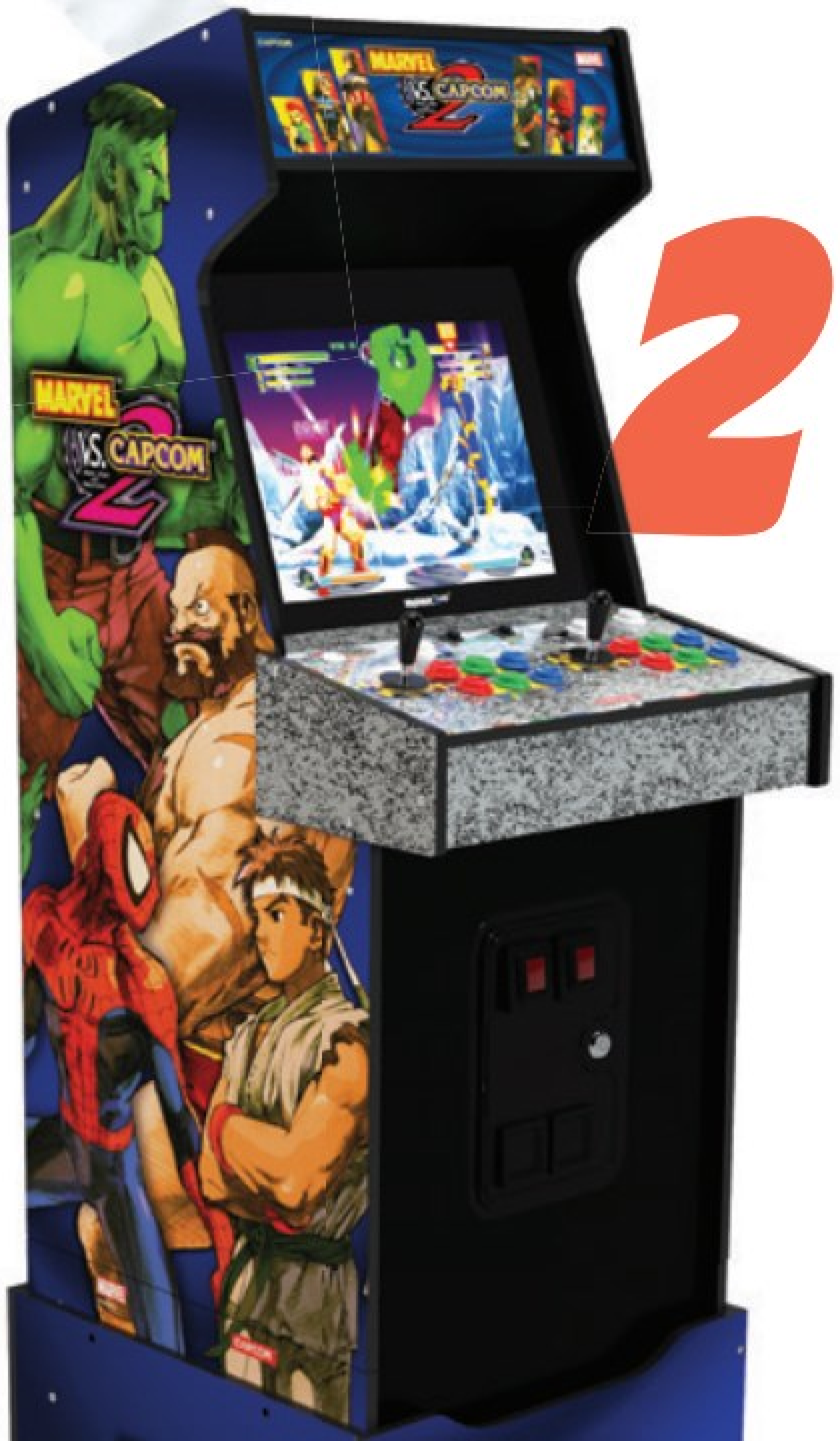

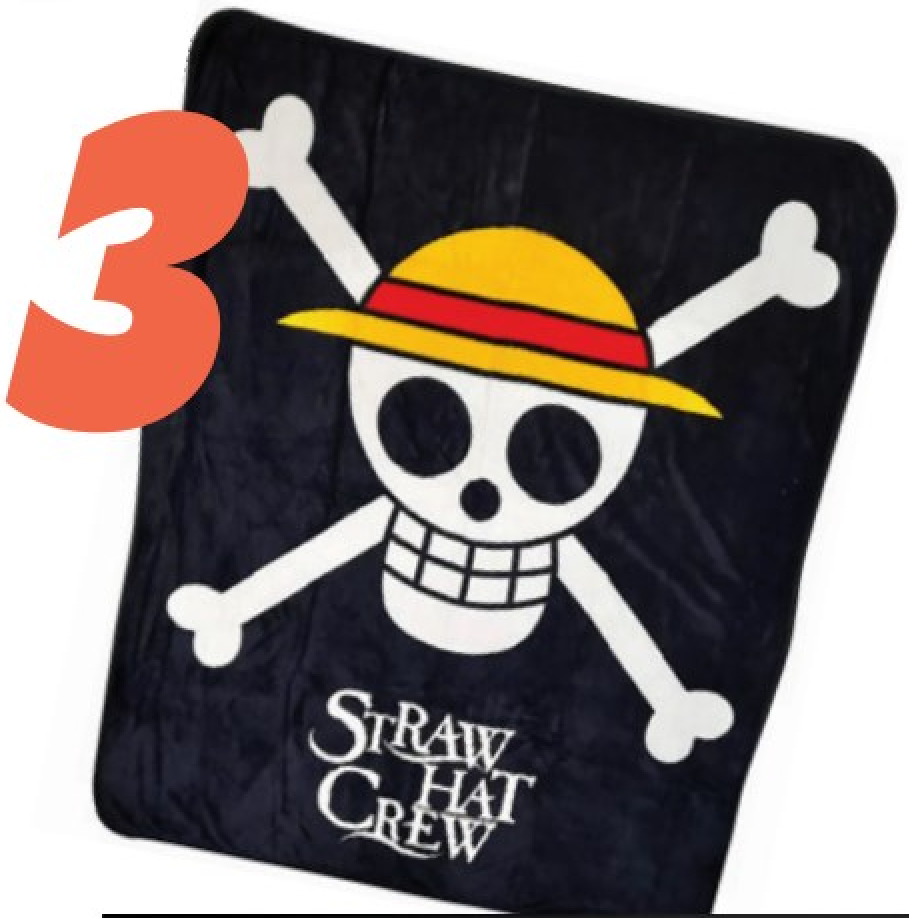

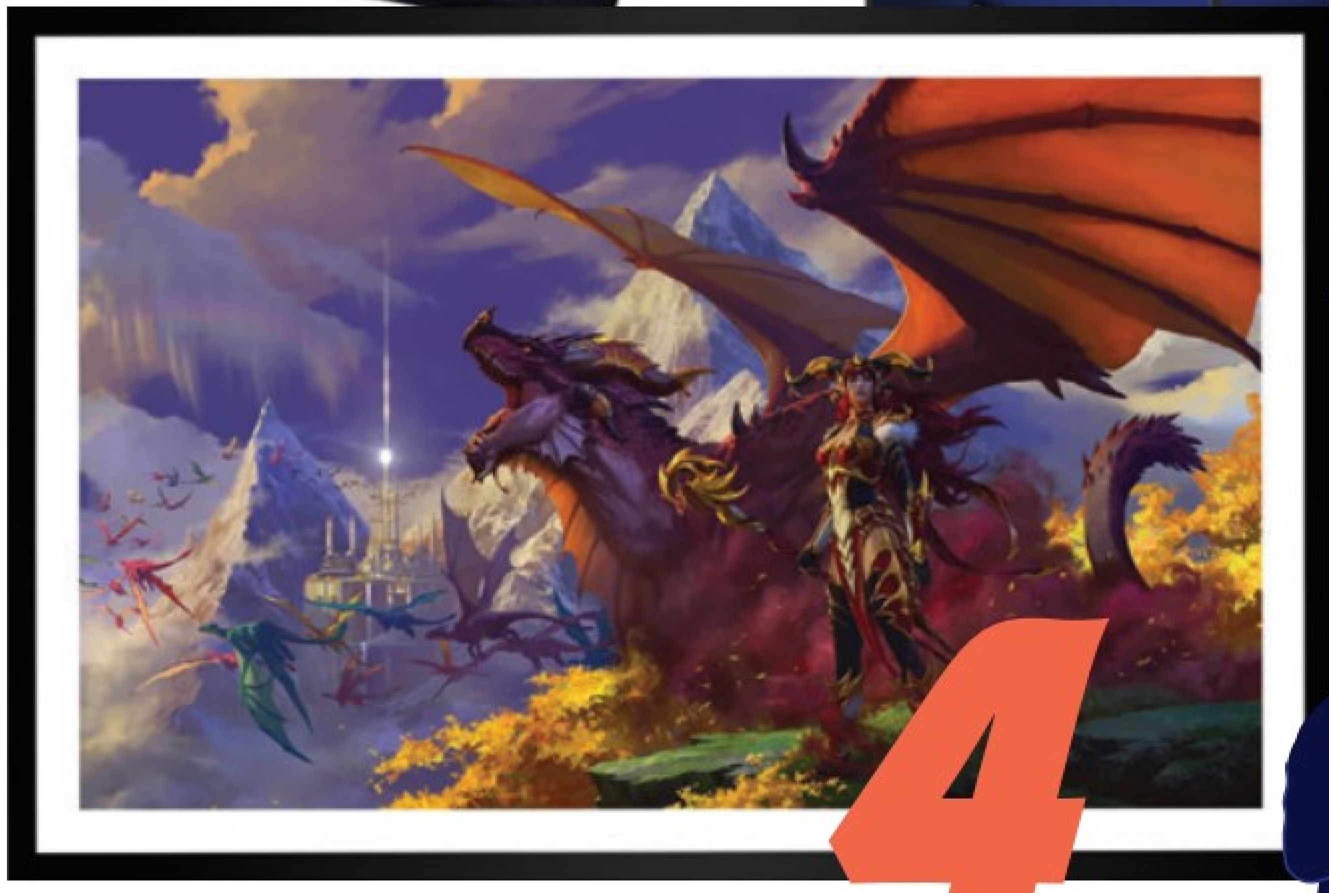

❶ PlayStation Taped-Up Ladies Cropped Hoodie

Recall an earlier era of PlayStation fun with this clean and cropped sweater featuring the controller's iconic colors and button shapes alongside a throwback logo. The material is a mix of ring-spun cotton and poly fleece, which gets high marks on comfort. It's an ideal choice if you're shopping for (or are) the person who has all the games but needs something enjoyable to play them in.

$57 | *gear.playstation.com*

❷ Arcade1Up Marvel vs. Capcom 2 Cabinet

The replica arcade machines from Arcade1Up range from Ms. Pac-Man to The Simpsons, effectively taking us on a stroll down memory lane with the form factor with which we're familiar from our favorite game rooms. The company's newest machine plasters the beloved Marvel vs. Capcom 2 on the marquee, but it features so much more than that massive crossover fighter. Once you fire this replica up, you have access to the headlining game plus Marvel vs. Capcom, Marvel Super Heroes vs. Street Fighter, X-Men vs. Street Fighter, Marvel Super Heroes, X-Men: Children of the Atom, X-Men: Mutant Apocalypse, and Marvel Super Heroes in War of the Gems.

$599 | *arcade1up.com*

❸ One Piece – Straw Hat Crew Throw Blanket

Embrace your love of anime's most long-lived and beloved pirate crew with this cozy blanket, which measures 50x60 inches – plenty big enough to shelter you from any errant sea storms. Made of 100 percent polyester, the throw is soft, machine-washable, and perfect for catching up on the latest adventures of Monkey D. Luffy.

$40 | *crunchyroll.com*

❹ World of Warcraft Return to the Dragon Isles Art Print

As Dragonflight prepares to lift off, you can celebrate your love of Azeroth's most popular winged creatures with this gorgeous 14x24 inch art print set within a 20x30 inch frame. The two-inch matte border on all sides perfectly frames the image, which is as much a celebration of dragon enthusiasm as it is your longtime World of Warcraft hobby. Artist Bayard Wu perfectly captures Alexstrasza, Aspect of the red dragonflight, even as the background shows the impending presence of many more draconic flyers as they venture forth into an uncertain future.

$150 | *gear.blizzard.com*

HOLIDAY DEALS

From

GameStop

Nintendo

Nintendo Switch™ – OLED Model
SKU 299009

11.18.22

Pokémon™ Violet
SKU 339270

11.18.22

Pokémon™ Scarlet
SKU 339268

holiday
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SPONSORED CONTENT

Home & Apparel

5 Modern Warfare II Logo Dark Heather Hoodie

When repping the return of your favorite franchise, simplicity can sometimes be the best choice. With Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II rolling out to do battle, you can snag this comfy 60 percent cotton, 40 percent polyester sweatshirt. It's perfect for those long winter nights ahead, cuddled up in your gaming chair as you try to figure out how in the world you just lost a fourth Domination match in a row. If you're more adventurous, a full line of t-shirts, hoodies, and designs offer a less subtle celebration of your fandom.

$65 | *shop.callofduty.com*

6 Super Nintendo Console Ornament

Add a little Nintendo magic to your tree decorating this year with this electronic light-up ornament honoring the king of 16-bit consoles. In addition to light-up effects, it plays familiar snatches of music and sounds from Super Mario World, and what's more Christmas-y than that?

$20 | *hallmark.com*

7 Craft Series Gaming Chair

Many companies have been gunning for control of the gaming chair market, but it's fair to say that DXRacer is largely responsible for the initial trend. There's good reason for its staying power, as DXRacer continues to put out comfortable, high-quality chairs that are easy to tweak to your preferred seating specs. That line of quality continues with the Craft series, which features a range of premade designs – you can also reach out to the company directly to ask about a design of your own. The seat itself is well-embroidered and smartly constructed. 4D armrests allow for angle, height, width, and depth changes, and the available 135-degree recline is enough to feel like a real lounger. It's a firm sit on the leather-wrapped high-density foam, but one that holds up to long hours of gaming without discomfort. That ease of use is thanks to features like integrated lumbar support and a cool gel memory foam pillow. There's plenty of competition in the category, but DXRacer is still offering some of the best.

$469 | *dxracer.com*

8 Twinkly Line & Music

Custom adjustable lighting has risen in popularity to transform a space, and the idea is especially well-suited to gaming rooms and home theater spaces. Twinkly's app-controlled LED strips are simple to use, with an adhesive strip that lets you easily add flair beneath the sofa, around your desk, behind the TV, or anywhere else. Once installed, you've got complete control over each individual LED to create ambient effects or wild color gradients along the length. For some added fun, plug in a Twinkly Music USB sound sensor, which uses a BPM counter and mic to sync and playback a light show to the music in your space.

$90 (Line), $30 (Music) | *twinkly.com*

7
CRAFT
DXRACER

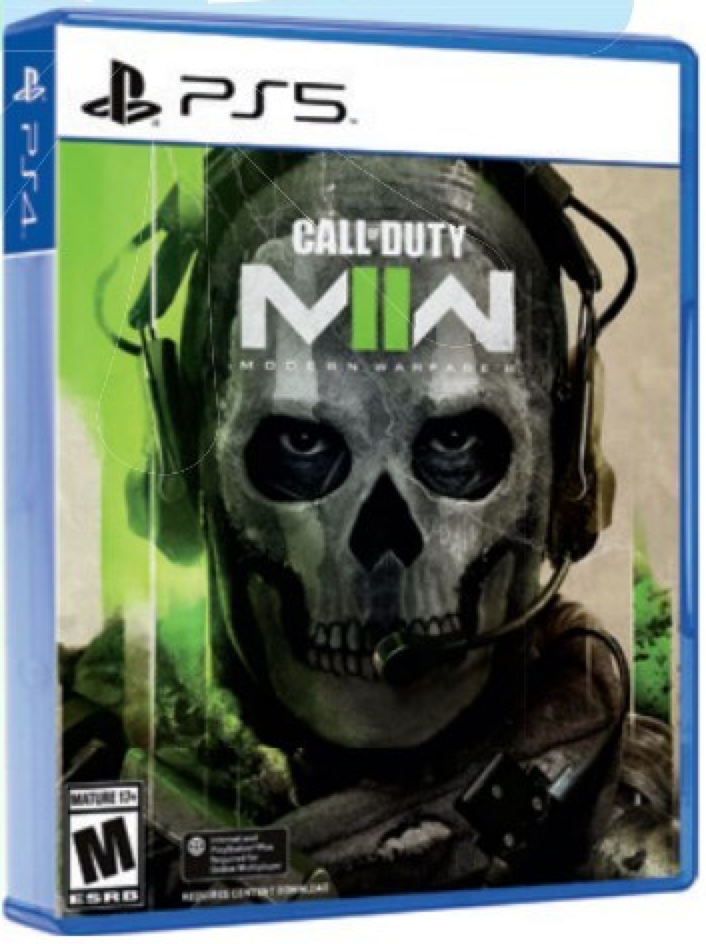
HOLIDAY DEALS

From

GameStop

Xbox Game Pass Ultimate 3 Month Membership
SKU 198534

Call of Duty Modern Warfare II
SKU 344752



Call of Duty Modern Warfare II
SKU 344750

GG (Good Gifts)

12.1.22

Marvel Legends Black Panther Mask Replica
with Vibrainium Light Up Effects
SKU 327018

RIG 500 PRO HC Competitive Gaming Headset with Dolby Atmos
SKU 232558

PlayStation® 5 Console
SKU 232353

SPONSORED CONTENT

Tech

❶ M90 Mini Blaster

Get ready to stand outside your crush's window and blast some Peter Gabriel. On second thought, don't do that, it's creepy; but do consider checking out this remarkable piece of throwback nostalgia. The original M90 boombox released in 1981 was the height of incredible sound for your preferred music. This replica is roughly 60 percent the size of the original, but features a wealth of authentic touches, from replica packaging to an opening cassette door with eject button. While it's a great retro throwback, it's no slouch as a Bluetooth speaker, pumping out 30 watts of sound from its two 3" speakers, and offering lengthy battery life as you adjust the treble, bass, balance, and volume knobs to your preferred settings. With its dual antennas, you can also rock out with the built-in FM tuner.

$159 | *newwavetoys.com*

❷ Drop + The Lord of the Rings Elvish Keyboard

Proclaim your love of Tolkien with each resonant click when you plug this lovely custom keyboard into your rig. The keyboard features a subtle, but attractive presentation of the Two Trees of Valinor, while the green hue of the compact but usable deck calls to mind the green leafy fields of Lothlórien. The keycaps are the star of the show, depicting every letter in both Elvish script and Latin (in case you're still learning). The tactile experience is excellent, with a nice concave curve to each key and a pleasant texture that prevents slippage without overgrip. For descendants of Durin's clan, a dwarven option is also available.

$179 | *drop.com*

❸ ZG01 Game Streaming Pack

For gamers looking for a higher level of control over their game audio, microphone output, and audio levels, Yamaha has put together a handy pack that includes an easy-to-use gaming mixer and an excellent headset. Both are available separately for a lower price. The mixer lets you play with mic settings and effects like reverb, radio voice, and pitch, along with fine-tuning game audio and chat. Meanwhile, the included YH-G01 is comfortable, light, and built around the stellar sound production of Yamaha's long years in the field. An excellent condenser mic picks up voice with accuracy while keeping background noise to an absolute minimum. Perhaps most importantly, the combined set is much easier to set up and run than many other market mixers, setting up even relative newcomers for success.

$419 | *usa.yamaha.com*

❹ Poly Studio P5 Webcam

Whether working from home, streaming, or any other video needs, a no-nonsense high-quality webcam can be worth its weight in gold. Poly's solution offers solid auto-focus imaging and low-light compensation in a 1080p resolution with 4x digital zoom. It's small, easy to slip on at the top of your monitor, and offers a built-in directional microphone for times you're not using a dedicated headset. It also includes a closeable lens for privacy. No muss, no fuss.

$80 | *poly.com*

❺ PS5 Gray Camouflage Console Cover

Sony just launched an entire new collection of PS5 accessories in this gray camouflage aesthetic. If you've been looking for a change of pace from the stark white, it's a fun way to change things up. So far, most of the official options have been solid colors, so it's nice to see something with a bit more texture. If you decide to take the plunge, make sure and snag the correct version for disc-drive or disc-free console versions, as it makes a difference. To go all in, you can also track down a new DualSense controller and Pulse3D headset in the same style, at which point you'll be more than ready for whatever a game throws at you.

$55 | *direct.playstation.com*

❻ MEG Trident X 12th Gen Gaming PC

For PC gamers who aren't ready to build from scratch, finding a rig that hits all your needs can be challenging without overtaxing the budget. Any way you approach it, it's a significant investment. We were impressed with MSI's new Trident X series, which offers a compact 10-liter volume that isn't going to overwhelm your space but impressed in performance above its weight class. Attractive styling and RGB lighting give way to easy-open door sides that make for easy customization. The model we tested ran high-end games with aplomb and notably, very quietly. Do your research as you configure your specific options, but the core machine here is well worth a look if you're willing to make a significant investment.

Starting at $2,400
us-store.msi.com

❼ Victrix Pro FS Arcade Fight Stick

Setting a new high-water mark for the competition to beat, the Victrix Pro FS is the definitive joystick for the most discerning and engaged fighting game enthusiasts. With Street Fighter 6 (see p. 42) on the horizon, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better controller. Available in a sleek form factor with a purple or white finish, the entire device feels premium, from the ergonomic tilt of the wrist slope to the rounded edges. Buttons are incredibly reactive, and the stick itself is responsive and solid. It's weighty enough to stay stable on the table but light enough to carry around with the integrated handles – simply a standout performer in every category. The Pro FS is compatible with PS5, PS4, or PC.

$399 | *pdp.com*

❽ PowerA Controller-Charging Base For Switch

If you do a lot of multiplayer gaming on your Switch, you're likely used to the dilemma of finding the best ways to get your various controllers and Joy-Cons plugged in to get batteries back up to full charge. PowerA's affordable solution offers you two Joy-Con slots and a dedicated controller plug-in (for the likes of a Pro controller). Charge lights let you know when each device is ready to go, and the low-profile stand itself is weighty enough to stay in place and do its job.

$30 | *powera.com*

7
X
Y
A
B
NINTENDO SWITCH
8

Tabletop

2

1

My Father's Work
The Cost of Disease
Village Chronicle

4

Pokémon
Lost Origin
Sword & Shield—Lost Origin

INDUSTRY
WARFARE
THE EMIRATES OF HACAN
THE TITANS OF UL
FLEDGLING EMPIRE
SHARD OF THE THRONE
CORPORATE TAX BREAKS
TECHNOLOGY EMBARGO

3

POWER
5
4
3
2
1
0
3 HEALTH
3 HEALTH
CODY
OBI-WAN KENOBI
VENATOR

5

❶ My Father's Work

Flip the switch and bring this creepy and delightful game to life on your table, in which two to four players each control a family of mad scientists over three generations, gradually enacting their ethically dubious research from a forbidding manor on the hillside. Worker placement mechanics meld smoothly together with a lavishly written free digital app that helps carry the story forward. It's a big, lengthy, and thoroughly rewarding experience that responds to the actions you take in surprising ways. Enjoy your turn as Dr. Frankenstein.

$125 | *renegadegamestudios.com*

❷ Box Monster

This simple kid-targeted game mixes manual dexterity and complex shape recognition. A wild-eyed monster lives with you, and it eats whatever it can get its mouth around, including all sorts of stuff in your house. Those uniquely shaped objects are cardboard pieces that sit inside the actual game box, and up to four questing hands can reach through holes in the side to pull out specific combinations (without being able to see them) and fix the poor guy's upset stomach. Silly, quick-playing, and likely to induce significant giggling, this cooperative game should be a hit to entertain even the shortest attention spans.

$29 | *shop.asmodee.com*

❸ Twilight Inscription

Over the years, the various editions of Twilight Imperium have garnered a well-deserved reputation for long play times. Twilight Inscription takes many of the most intriguing elements of that fiction – intergalactic warfare, player voting to change rules, resource management – and refines the experience into a less overwhelming play session. The bigger shift is toward a "roll and write" structure, in which you track your civilization's advancements by marking up several sheets representing things like navigation and industry. The result is a tense and challenging competition that nails the futuristic tone and politicking of the franchise but with a new twist.

$65 | *fantasyflight.com*

❹ Pokémon Trading Card Game: Sword & Shield – Lost Origin

While Pokémon Scarlet and Violet arrive on Nintendo Switch this month, the long-running Trading Card Game continues to deliver expansions inspired by Sword, Shield, and Legends: Arceus. Lost Origin features the return of the Lost Zone, a discard-like mechanic first introduced years ago. The cards in the expansion feature several fan-favorite creatures, including special cards showcasing the bond between trainers and their Pokémon.

As with most Pokémon TCG expansions, you can dip your toe in through individual 10-card booster packs or dive in head-first with an expansion-specific Elite Trainer Box, with options in between to suit your needs.

Starting at $4 | *pokemoncenter.com*

❺ Star Wars: The Clone Wars

The Pandemic gaming system has increasingly shown its flexibility to provide exciting cooperative experiences, regardless of the theme. That's proven again with this take on the Clone Wars as they were fought in that familiar galaxy far away. Players control uniquely powered Jedi as they hop between planets, attempting to hold back the tide of the Separatist forces. Excellent card and board art captures the feel of the Star Wars mythology. Unique scenarios add replay value, each steering toward a fateful encounter with the likes of Darth Maul or General Grievous. Like the best games of previous Pandemic games, only a Jedi Council that works together in the will of the Force will triumph.

$60 | *zmangames.com*

❻ Origins Game Table

If you've longed for a home table that meets the dual goals of an attractive family dinner spot and fully featured game night gathering place, the Origins is a solid bet. The solid ash wood table construction is sturdy and straightforward to assemble, though heavy enough to require multiple volunteers. Built-in cupholders and game piece holders keep everything in place. A recessed play surface can be customized with your preferred felt or other covering, offering a large 61"x37" play surface from which no dice will escape. An optional dining top can be purchased to cover the play surface, keeping things classy even while a stalled Lego build or RPG session waits beneath.

Starting at $2,699
gametheorytables.com

❼ D&D Icons Of The Realms Tarrasque

Spend enough time with the same D&D group, and someone will eventually bring up the absurdity of what it might be like to take on the Tarrasque, that most epic and unstoppable of monsters from the long-running RPG. This kaiju-like monster terrorizes the countryside wherever it awakens, sometimes after decades of inactivity. But there's no need to let it slumber in your display cabinet, where it can stand ready to charge into battle whenever your DM has a bad day. Scaled against WizKids other standard minis, this towering figure is nearly 16 inches from thrashing tail to biting maw. ■

$399 | *shop.wizkids.com*

RETURNING TO ROUND ONE

AS PLAYERS LOOK FORWARD TO THE NEXT STAGE OF *STREET FIGHTER*, WE LOOK BACK AT 35 YEARS OF THE FABLED FIGHTING FRANCHISE

BY BRIAN SHEA

IF YOU WALKED INTO AN ARCADE IN THE 1990S,

it undoubtedly had a Street Fighter II cabinet. If you went at the right time, you probably even saw a crowd gathered around it. As one of the most profitable games in arcade history, Street Fighter II drew more than its fair share of quarters and tokens during the arcade heyday. But the franchise transcends that one moment in time. To say that Street Fighter has sparked multiple revolutions in its genre throughout its history is not far-fetched.

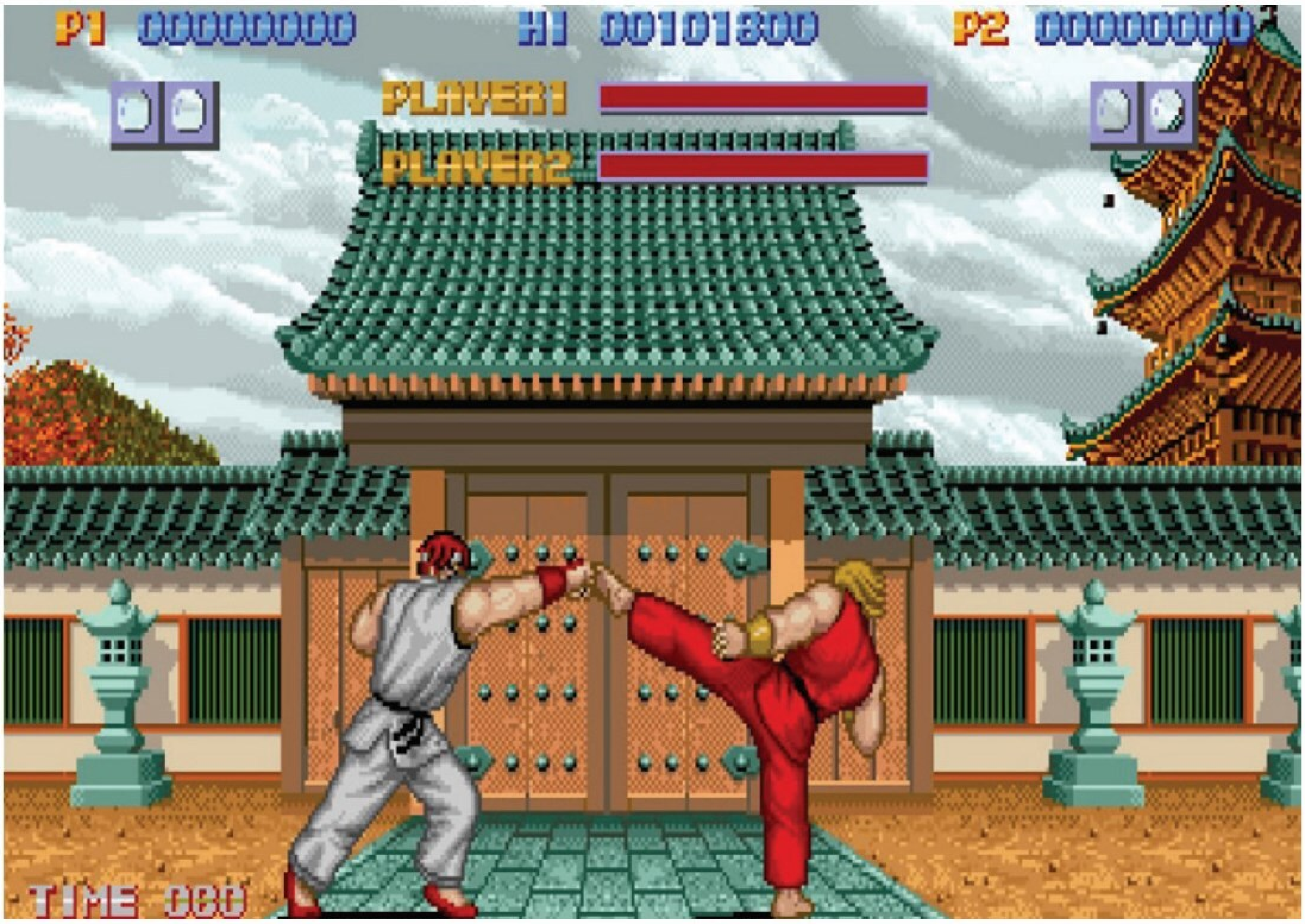
Arcades aren't omnipresent the way they once were, but the Street Fighter name has endured the ever-shifting grounds of the games industry. The fierce fistfights made the leap from mall game rooms to the living room, the internet, and even tournaments broadcast to massive, international audiences. As the franchise turns 35 years old, we met with the people involved to understand the series' origins and how it remains relevant three-and-a-half decades later.

HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER

You'd be forgiven if you've never played the original Street Fighter. Even by late '80s standards, it wasn't particularly remarkable outside of its concept. But that initial game laid the all-important groundwork for the franchise and genre. Bored in a long meeting with Capcom's sales team, designer Takashi Nishiyama caught himself daydreaming. As the meeting stretched to the near two-hour mark, he was struck by inspiration.

As he recalled to *Polygon* in 2020, Nishiyama began sketching his idea on a piece of paper. Inspired by the one-on-one boss battles in the 1984 beat 'em up game Kung-Fu Master (which he also worked on), as well as Bruce Lee's 1972 film, *Game of Death*, Nishiyama jotted down the basic concept of two characters facing off in one-on-one combat. Once he had it on paper, he showed it to producer Yoshiki Okamoto, sitting next to him in the meeting. Okamoto thought the idea looked interesting, so Nishiyama created a design document out of the concept and presented it to higher-ups, including planner Hiroshi Matsumoto. Once Capcom green-lit the project, Nishiyama and Matsumoto worked together to flesh out the idea.

Pulling from their interests in martial arts, Matsumoto and Nishiyama immediately started brainstorming about the kinds of fighters and moves they should put in the game. While the game universe today includes



several colorful characters with distinct fighting styles, initially players could only control Ryu, representing Japan, and Ken, representing the United States. Ryu and Ken handled identically to one another, possessing the same attributes, moves, and techniques. This allowed for completely balanced one-on-one competitive combat against another player, but more importantly, it let the team remain on budget and schedule.

When Street Fighter arrived in arcades across the globe in 1987, Capcom shipped two distinct cabinets. The first cabinet carries the now-standard six-button configuration, with each button representing a different power level for a kick or punch. The second, known as the "Deluxe" cabinet, replaced the six buttons with two pressure-sensitive pads: one for punches and another for kicks. On that arcade machine, Ryu or Ken threw their attacks based on how hard players hit these pads. As you might imagine, these Deluxe cabinets weren't long for this world; they essentially encouraged players to damage the machine and were replaced mainly by the more popular six-button alternative.

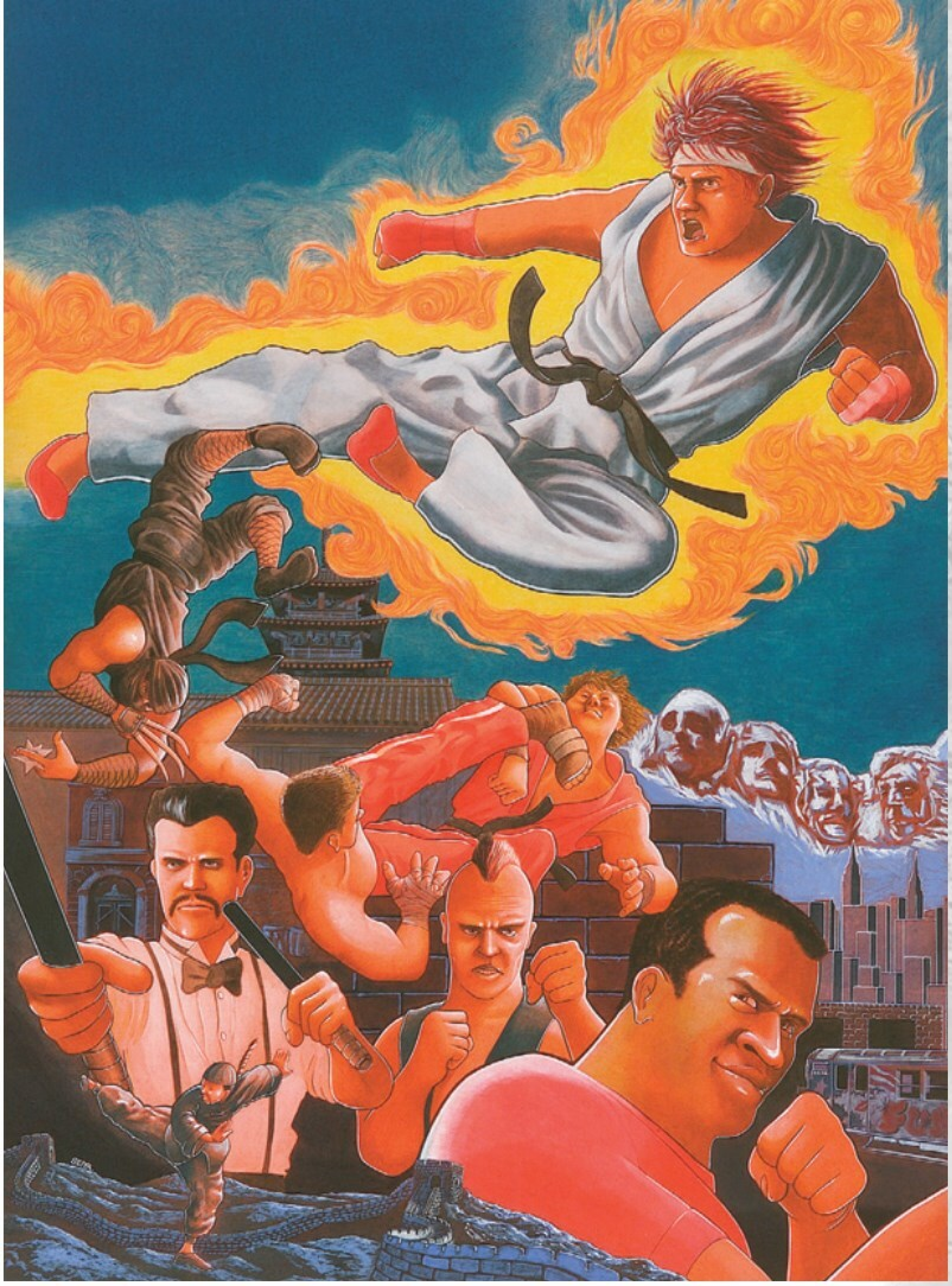
While the first Street Fighter is worth revisiting today solely as a historical curiosity, that nascent gameplay style, as stiff and barebone as it was, aptly laid the groundwork for what came next. With a sequel given the go-ahead by Capcom, the developers of Street Fighter began working on the game that would change the world forever.

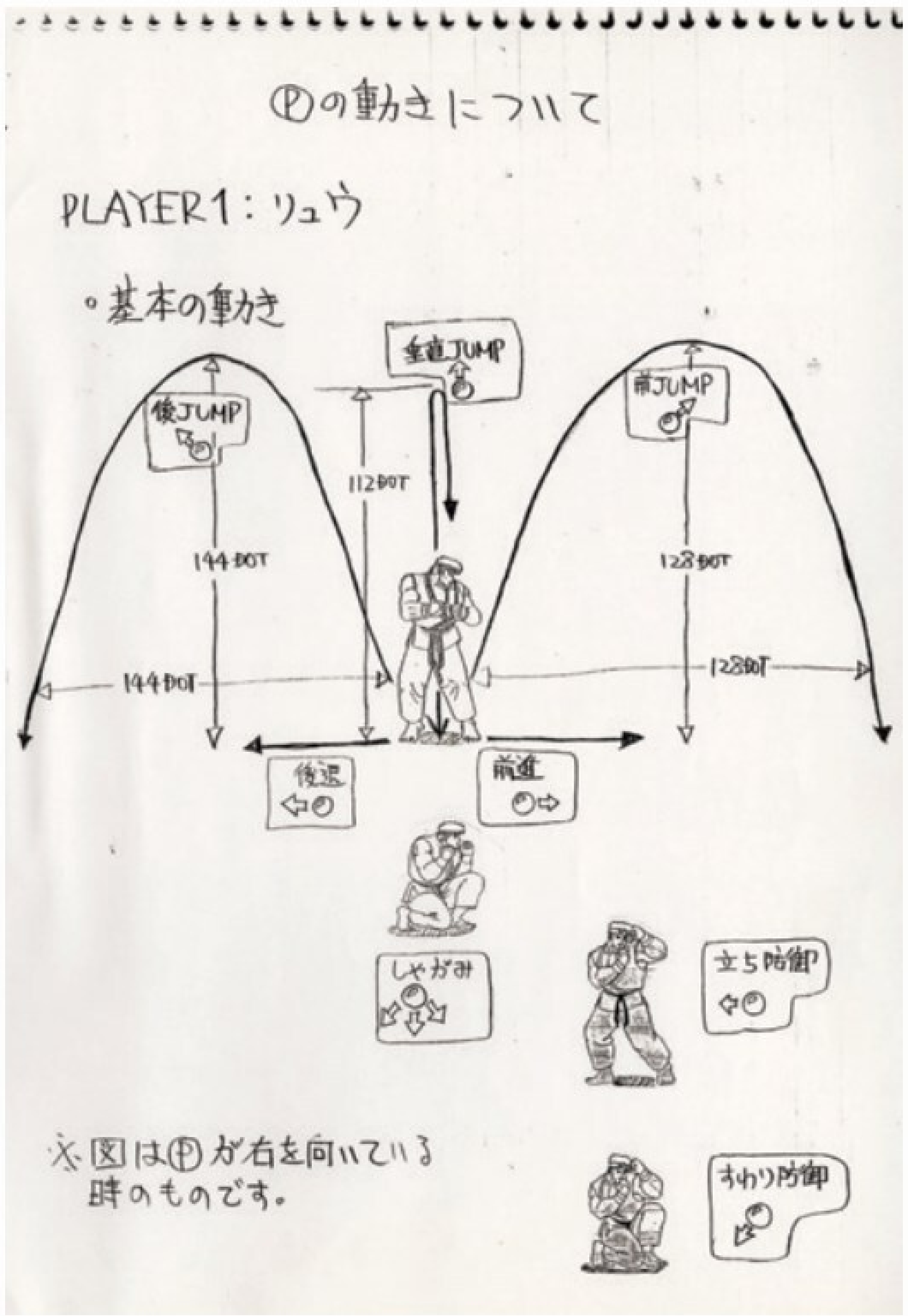
ROUND TWO

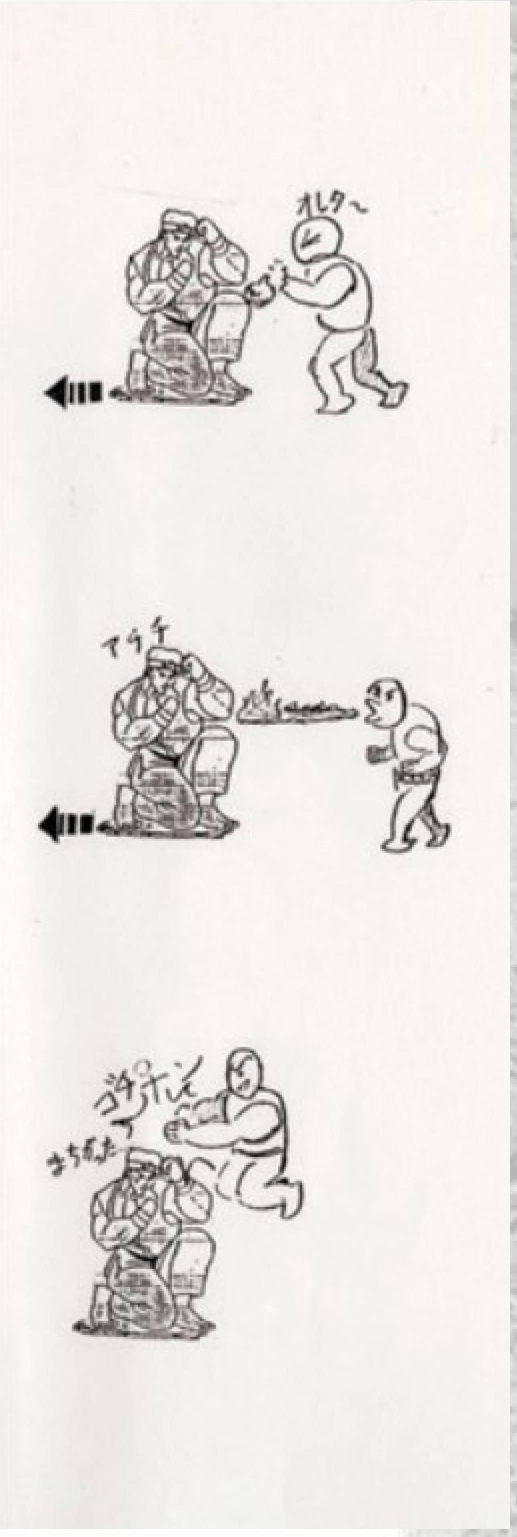
Following the commercial success of 1989's Final Fight in the United States, Capcom decided to focus development efforts on games in the fighting genre. Part of that involved developing a sequel to Street Fighter. Both Nishiyama and Matsumoto left Capcom shortly after the launch of the first game, so Capcom tapped the man Nishiyama showed the initial concept in that meeting, Yoshiki Okamoto, to produce Street Fighter II. Capcom also pulled in Final Fight designers Akira Nishitani and Akira Yasuda to work as designers on the fighting follow-up.

With the core development team from another series picking up the ball and running with the Street Fighter franchise, the team pulled from a wider array of inspirations. "From my perspective, we were making a sequel to Street Fighter I, but a lot of animations and character designs came from Final Fight, and we tried to apply a lot of the content from that for Street Fighter II," Capcom creative director and Street Fighter II character designer Shoei Okano says. "But in comparison to Final Fight, Street Fighter II has a lot more animation patterns and more characters."

The primary goal for Capcom was to create gameplay that matched the promising premise of the original Street Fighter. Taking the popular six-button configuration of







the first game, Capcom implemented easier-to-execute commands for special moves, smoother animations and gameplay, and an all-new combo system.

In a 2002 interview with *Edge*, producer Noritaka Funamizu says he accidentally discovered the combo system as a glitch while playtesting. He noticed that he could string together multiple attacks in a cohesive manner if the strikes were timed right. As Funamizu notes in the interview, this system became a massive part of the franchise.

Discovering another major innovation required much less skill and investigation. In fact, it might be the first thing you notice about Street Fighter II: the roster of playable characters. Ryu and Ken remained on the roster, but aside from the boss character Sagat carrying forward, the game featured an all-new cast of unique fighters. Chun-Li, Guile, Blanka, Dhalsim, Zangief, and E. Honda joined Ryu and Ken as playable fighters, while the final challenge of Arcade mode featured a gauntlet against nonplayable characters Balrog (known as "Boxer" in international tournaments), Vega (known as "Claw"), Sagat, and M. Bison (known as "Dictator").

Once word of Street Fighter II got out to other Capcom teams, the game became a hot topic publisher-wide, hinting to the Street Fighter II team that it was onto something. "Even the developers from other, non-Street Fighter titles would come to play for fun," Okano says. "We saw that excitement, and we knew we had something going for us."

Street Fighter II: The World Warrior arrived in arcades in early 1991, less than two years after it entered development. While the game featured countless improvements over its predecessor, it didn't find immediate success. Capcom attributes this to players not understanding the multiplayer merits of the cabinet and instead focusing too much on the single-player Arcade mode.

"I didn't really know what to expect," Okano says. "A lot of stuff came as a surprise, but eventually we were able to run a location test at one of the local arcades where we brought in a test arcade cabinet of Street Fighter II. When we placed it in the arcade, there were a lot of people who rushed in to see the sequel to Street Fighter I. Everyone was super excited to try it out, but even though two players were able to play, most people were expecting only to be able to do one-player battles."

Capcom quickly shifted its marketing efforts to emphasize its two-player battle mode. The game exploded. After a tepid start, Street Fighter II: The World Warrior became the highest-grossing arcade game of 1991 in the U.S. and Japan and topped the Japanese charts again in 1992. By the end of 1992, Street Fighter II had become the best-selling arcade game of the last 10 years. A new kind of arcade culture formed around Street Fighter II cabinets, as crowds gathered, players put quarters in the little grooves below the screen to claim "next," and competitive gaming took off in ways never seen before.

1P 12201
RYU

The runaway success inspired various other publishers and developers to jump on board with this new genre. “Street Fighter II really invigorated things, and that was a big inspiration for us,” Mortal Kombat co-creator Ed Boon says. “To me, the fighting game genre wasn't even a genre, really. It's not like there was a bunch of games in that category! It was really scattered; every once in a while, one would exist. Street Fighter blew that door open. Mortal Kombat broke the next door open. Between those two games, it suddenly became [a genre] because everybody wanted to get a piece of that. It became a genre based on Mortal Kombat and, before that, Street Fighter's success.”

Though Street Fighter II: The World Warrior was popular, Capcom wanted to create a better experience for players and, in the process, capitalize on the millions of dollars pouring into the cabinets across the globe. To do this, the company started releasing newer versions of the game through all-new cabinets. That first version, The World Warrior, was followed just over a year later in early 1992 by Champion Edition. This new version balanced the original eight playable characters, made the four Shadaloo boss characters playable, and enabled mirror matches for the first time, letting two players fight against each other using the same character.

Capcom didn’t stop there, though. That same calendar year, late 1992, Street Fighter II Turbo arrived in arcades. Turbo added a faster game mode, additional balancing, and new special moves. In 1993, Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers again balanced the roster while adding four new playable characters. Finally, in 1994, arcades received Super Street Fighter II Turbo, complete with air combos, super combos, and another new character, Akuma. While each of these cabinets represented different versions of Street Fighter II, they all shared in the original’s success; each version reached the number one spot on the arcade charts in both the U.S. and Japan.

However, the game didn’t stay exclusively in arcades, as Street Fighter II experienced similar success on home consoles. Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis received most of the versions alongside the arcade cabinet releases, but Capcom continues to re-release these titles on consoles to this day. Some consoles have even received new versions of Street Fighter II long after its main lifespan. In 2008, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 received Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix, an HD port with modernized visuals featuring a new art style from the UDON Entertainment team in charge of the Street Fighter comic books, as well as a new soundtrack, further balancing, and online play. Then, in 2017, Capcom released Ultra Street Fighter II: The Final Challengers. This Nintendo Switch-exclusive release added a new first-person mode called “Way of the Hado” and two new playable characters: Evil Ryu and Violent Ken.

Street Fighter II remains one of the most beloved video games of all time, and the accolades, record profits, and community support made it one of the most successful games ever released. Though it was a tough and unprecedented act to follow, Capcom subverted expectations in the succeeding years.

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UNFAMILIAR STREETS

Rather than immediately jump into a numbered sequel of Street Fighter II, Capcom took a detour through the early years of the story. Set after the events of Street Fighter but before Street Fighter II, the Alpha series features younger versions of many fan-favorites. This placement in the timeline allowed Capcom to use characters from the rosters of Street Fighter, Street Fighter II, and even the Final Fight series.

The Alpha trilogy, launching in 1995, 1996, and 1998, introduced now-beloved characters like Sakura, R. Mika, Rose, Dan, and Charlie, as well as mechanics like the gauge-based Super Combo system. Street Fighter Alpha 3 proved to be the fitting send-off for the subseries, improving the Super Combo system through a selectable "ism" mechanic that gave players a choice on how to engage with their gauges. Alpha 3 also included an enormous roster that ranged from 28 to 38 characters, depending on which version you played, and a World Tour mode enabling character customization and more fleshed-out storylines.

On the heels of the Jean-Claude Van Damme and Raul Julia-led *Street Fighter* theatrical film, Capcom released the Street Fighter: The Movie video game. While still a 2D fighting game, the character models used digitized images of many of the actors, including Van Damme. Despite the star power and trendy graphical style, critics and fans largely panned the game.

Around that same time, Capcom worked with Arika, a development studio founded by Street Fighter II designer Akira Nishitani, to create a trilogy of Street Fighter EX games. These titles ditched the sprite-based characters of previous games in favor of polygonal graphics. Though it features 3D visuals, the EX games still play like the 2D games. It's an officially licensed Street Fighter trilogy, but the spin-off series focuses heavily on characters exclusive to the EX games, with only five Street Fighter II characters crossing over.

Though the visuals were revolutionary then, the gameplay and lack of a recognizable cast made for a largely forgotten spin-off series that Capcom hasn't revisited since EX3 launched in 2000. However, the EX titles did give the series at least one gift: canceling. By canceling out of one move and into another, players could string together massive combos.

During that period, Street Fighter characters began appearing in crossover titles. Following Capcom's releases of X-Men: Children of Atom and Marvel Super Heroes, Capcom brought the most popular Street Fighter characters and the era's most popular Marvel characters together for X-Men vs. Street Fighter. This entry, which first hit arcades in 1996, adopted the 2D fighting style of Street Fighter, but amped up the action and enabled a tag-team style featuring teams of two characters. Less than a year later, the roster was expanded in a 1997 sequel, Marvel Super Heroes vs. Street Fighter, then expanded again in 1998 in Marvel vs. Capcom: Clash of Super Heroes.

The Marvel vs. Capcom franchise spawned four mainline entries and remains one of Capcom's most popular fighting game franchises, with the Street Fighter characters featuring prominently on the rosters. However, Street Fighter characters have continued crossing over with other prominent franchises and companies, including Tekken, Tatsunoko, SNK, Super Smash Bros., and Power Rangers. Though the success of these crossovers has been a boon for both Capcom and Street Fighter fans, nothing quite matches the excitement surrounding a new, mainline Street Fighter title.

STRIKING WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

While all these spinoffs and pseudo-sequels were being developed and released to critical and commercial acclaim, the community was still hungry for a true sequel to Street Fighter II. In 1995, in the middle of releasing the Alpha and EX trilogies, Capcom began the development of a new mainline entry in the series. In 1997, it launched Street Fighter III: New Generation.

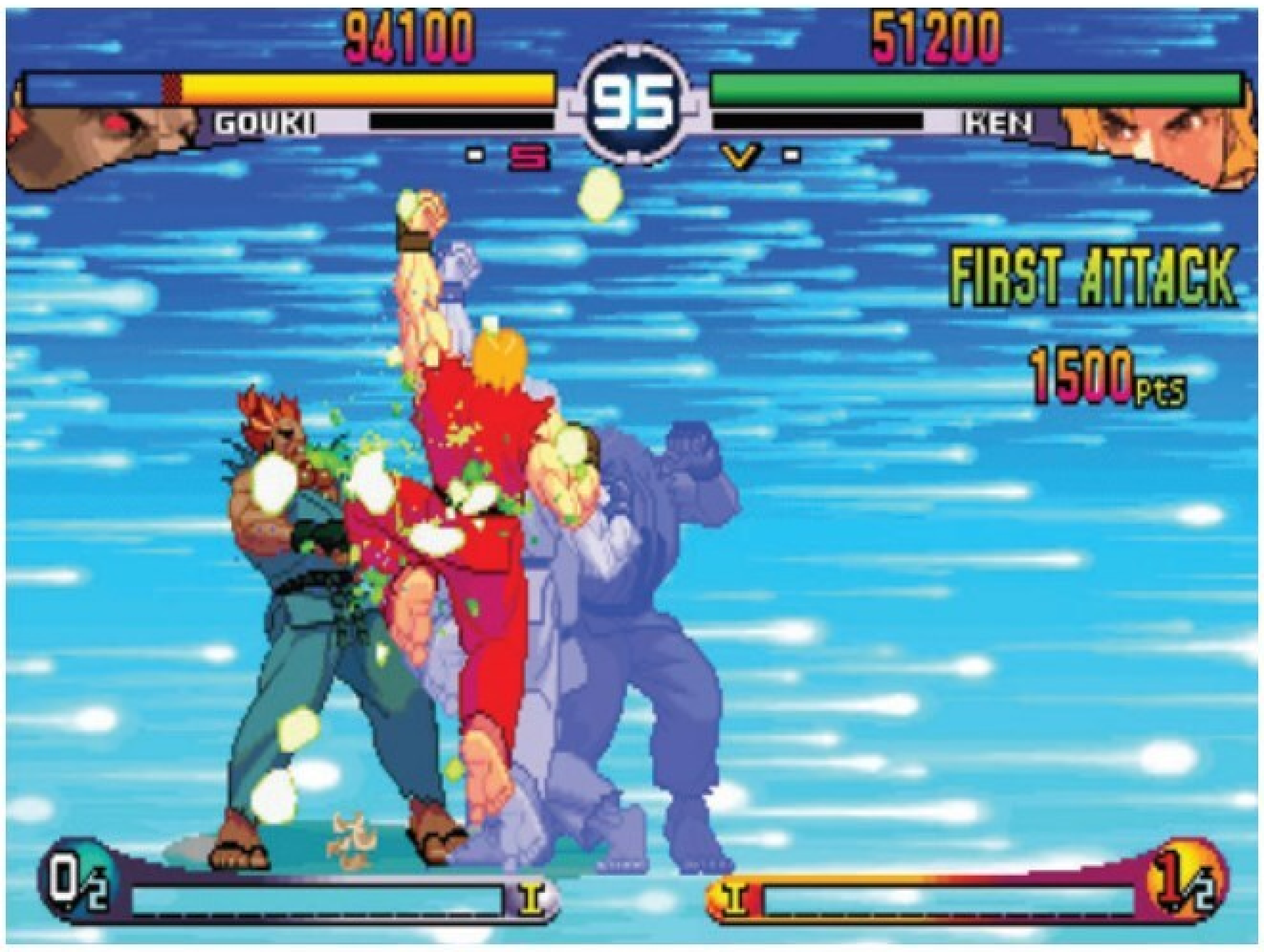
COMPETITIVE EVOLUTION

Whether you're talking about the crowds gathered around the Street Fighter II cabinets in the 1990s or on Twitch in the 2020s, Street Fighter is nearly as watchable as it is playable. Out of this revelation of the genre's popularity from a spectator's perspective, various public tournaments that sought to bring together the best fighting game players on Earth popped up. The most prominent is Evolution Championship Series, otherwise known as Evo. Evo started as a small Super Street Fighter II Turbo and Street Fighter Alpha 2 tournament in a California arcade hall in 1996, known then as Battle by the Bay. Today, it draws thousands of competitors and attendees annually to Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, Nevada, to compete in a wide range of fighting titles, including Street Fighter V: Champion Edition.

The title was apt, as Capcom moved away from the iconic roster of characters of Street Fighter II and Alpha, only carrying forward Ryu and Ken. That same year, Capcom released Street Fighter III: 2nd Impact, which expanded the roster with new characters and reintroduced fan-favorite Akuma. Finally, Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike launched in 1999, bringing more new characters, Chun-Li, and a grading system to tell the winning player how well they street fought.

Street Fighter III is also noteworthy for introducing parrying, rewarding players for taking the risk of pressing forward into an incoming attack instead of the standard retreating block many were accustomed to. The parry system complemented the new Alpha-inspired gauge-based Super Arts and the EX-inspired canceling to create what is perhaps the most perfectly paced and precision-based fighting system ever seen.

"While highly flawed in the first game, New Generations, [the parry system] was perfected by Third Strike, the third iteration of SFIII," esports commentator James Chen says. "And honestly, its story of going from basically a flop in the U.S. to becoming one of the most beloved fighting games of all time here in the States is a long, long journey. [...] The parry mechanic remains as one of the most beloved and player-satisfying mechanics ever created."



Though Street Fighter III didn't revolutionize fighting games like its numbered predecessor, it perfected the formula. But it was a gem fans didn't fully appreciate in its time. However, even as competing fighting game franchises flourished under the new trend of 3D visuals and fight planes, the Street Fighter franchise entered the largest lull of its history, and fans didn't receive a new Street Fighter game for eight years.

THE LEADERBOARD

In 2019, *Game Informer* published a list of the 30 greatest fighting games of all time. While just one year prior, Super Street Fight II Turbo ranked as our 14th greatest video game ever released, that game did not end up topping our list of the best fighting games. Check out where Capcom's legendary fighting game franchise ranked among the best of the best.

18. Street Fighter Alpha 3

10. Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition

3. Super Street Fighter II Turbo

1. Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike

On top of those mainline Street Fighter titles, games featuring Street Fighter characters that ranked in the top 30 include Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 (#19), Super Smash Bros. Ultimate (#17), Capcom vs. SNK 2: Mark of the Millennium 2001 (#11), Tekken 7 (#7), and Marvel vs. Capcom 2: New Age of Heroes (#6).

A RETURN TO FORM

Street Fighter relinquished its claim to the throne in the early years of the new millennium. With more players looking to enjoy a 3D experience, franchises like Tekken, Soulcalibur, and Dead or Alive stepped into the spotlight. Even Street Fighter's closest rival, Mortal Kombat, transitioned to 3D fighters. Despite the EX spin-off series' use of 3D graphics, Street Fighter always remained steadfast in its 2D action. The final EX entry landed on PlayStation 2 in 2000, giving fans nothing more than re-releases of Street Fighter II and III on modern consoles in the succeeding years.

"People basically had forgotten about the genre," Chen says. "While some franchises like Tekken and Guilty Gear continued to create quality games, other franchises like Street Fighter disappeared and Mortal Kombat had its notorious run of awful games during that period. Basically, in the U.S., fighting games were a thing of the past."

However, as all its rivals trailblazed 3D frontiers, Yoshinori Ono, whose work with Capcom stretched back to the early '90s, noticed how many people clamored for a new mainline entry. Based on the reception to Street Fighter II on Xbox Live Arcade, he petitioned Capcom's Keiji Inafune to allow the team to create a new mainline game inspired by Super Street Fighter II Turbo.

Ono, who had previously worked as a sound producer on the Alpha games, stepped into the producer role as he tried to bring the series back to its roots. The result was Street Fighter IV, a game that used modern visuals and embellished 3D character models with ink-based flourishes instead of sprites. The team maintained the tight, responsive 2D fighting action that made Street Fighter so popular in the first place by implementing 2D hitboxes over the 3D character models.

Street Fighter IV landed in arcades in 2008, with home releases arriving less than a year later. The fourth mainline entry was a rousing success with fans and critics. By combining the classic gameplay and characters with beautiful visuals and new conventions, Street Fighter IV quickly became a modern classic and again ushered in a new era for the fighting genre. Though 3D games dominated the 2000s, the subsequent decade proved the importance of Street Fighter IV's demonstration that enthusiasm still existed for the 2D segment. In the following years, several franchises – both new and old – embraced the 2D style once more, kicking off a renaissance for the genre.

Street Fighter IV continued to grow, with new versions releasing until 2014, ballooning the playable roster to 44 fighters. Ultra Street Fighter IV became a gold standard of the fighting game genre thanks to its diverse roster, a cornucopia of content, and tight gameplay. The franchise had bounced back from its biggest gap in compelling fashion, delivering one of the greatest games in the genre's history. Street Fighter IV nailed modern gameplay while demonstrating fans were still hungry for classic gameplay, but it was time to evolve again.

That evolution came with Street Fighter V, a 2D fighter released in 2016 exclusively on PlayStation 4 and PC. The gameplay of Street Fighter V remained tight, iterating on what players experienced in Street Fighter IV while introducing moves like Critical Arts and V-Gauge moves. Capcom also laid out ambitious DLC plans including characters, stages, costumes, and more, but many criticized the game's launch.

Early in its marketing, Capcom announced players could earn all characters for free through gameplay, but following launch, it became apparent it would require arguably unreasonable hours of play. Not only that, but the modes available at launch were barebones, with no Training mode, Arcade mode, or meaningful single-player story content. Even Ono, who executive

produced Street Fighter V, and Capcom CEO Kenzo Tsujimoto, acknowledged the lack of content and polish at launch.

"There were a lot of things that they wanted to get done around the launch of the game, but they weren't able to succeed in delivering all the elements and the features that they originally wanted," director Takayuki Nakayama, who joined the project midway through development, says.

Capcom got to work addressing the criticisms. Before launch, it announced a post-launch update called "A Shadow Falls," providing a cinematic story mode. The company launched this update for free in June 2016. In 2018, Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition delivered the long-awaited Arcade and Extra Battle modes and additional V-Trigger moves for every character. Arcade Edition was available for free as a title update to everyone who purchased the original game. Finally, in 2020, Street Fighter V: Champion Edition delivered sweeping balance changes, additional V-Skill moves for each character, and more. Champion Edition was also available for free to owners of Street Fighter V.

Street Fighter V course-corrected in many regards, but Capcom decided to move on from development before the original post-launch content plan could be fully realized. "Street Fighter V was originally planned to have six seasons, but then plans ended up changing, and we were told we could only make up to season four," Nakayama says.

However, the community received Champion Edition so well that Capcom changed course again and announced a fifth and final season of content, which would serve as an endcap to the Street Fighter V saga and set the stage for what's to come. Despite this shift, before the first content arrived, Ono stepped away from Capcom, ending a decades-long tenure.

Street Fighter V closed the book on its final season in November 2021, giving fans a glimmer of hope for what's next. While it began its lifespan under heavy criticism, it ended with a robust suite of modes, a healthy competitive community, and more characters than any Street Fighter game before.

While Nakayama and producer Shuhei Matsumoto weren't a part of the initial Street Fighter V development, they took various lessons from the launch and vowed to implement them in the next game. "Starting with Season 5, we changed the structure of the team," Nakayama says. "And we learned that we wanted to take on a more direct communication style with the audience and players of the game. We received a lot of positive feedback about that. We realized that is very important for our audience."

Street Fighter V served as a solid lesson for Capcom about what fans do and don't like, and it showed that the publisher is willing to deliver on that fan feedback. With the departure of the man who fought to bring Street Fighter back to its roots in a time when nobody believed in it, the Street Fighter franchise was at a crossroads as it looked ahead to the future.

In 2018, Capcom began developing the next game in the series.

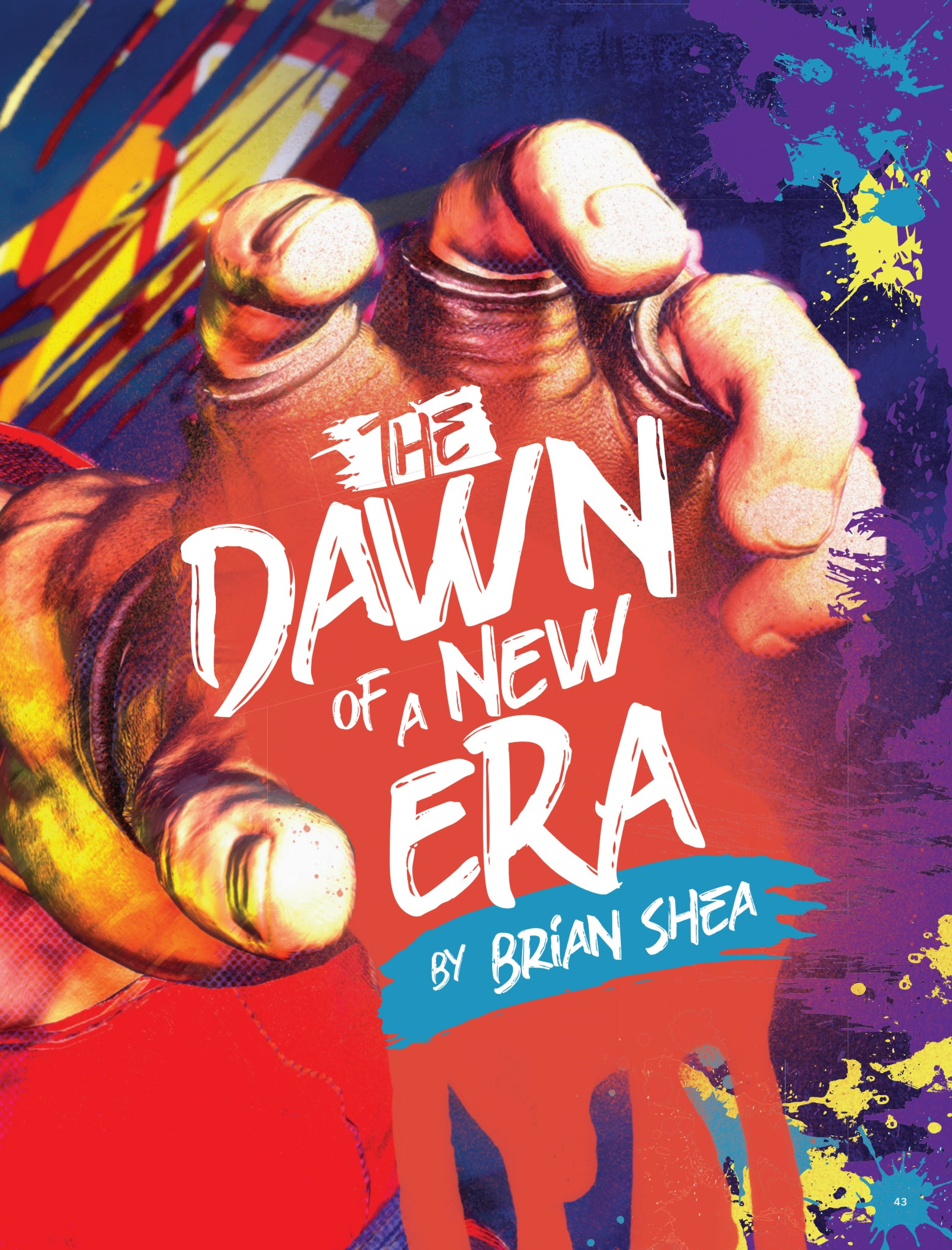
FUTURE FIGHTS

The last of Street Fighter V's many DLC characters, Luke Sullivan, represented the road ahead for the series.

"Street Fighter 6 was in development during the tail end of Street Fighter V and rather than Luke being the final new character of Street Fighter V, we saw him more as kind of a guest character coming from the future," Nakayama says. "At the time, we didn't announce Street Fighter 6 yet, so we didn't have the clear context behind who Luke is. It was a bit nerve-wracking. We wanted to make sure that we presented him under the correct light and were really excited but very cautious about that."

Luke utilizes tactics he learned in the military to employ a specialized MMA style. But more importantly, he steps into the spotlight as the main protagonist for the next mainline game. That game is Street Fighter 6, which introduces loads of improvements, characters, mechanics, and features into the formula. This revolutionary next step in the series launches in 2023, seven years after Street Fighter V first arrived. To learn more about how Capcom is hoping to, once again, revolutionize the fighting genre, continue on and read our cover story on Street Fighter 6 (p. 42). ■

HOW CAPCOM IS BRINGING A GAME THAT IS SIMULTANEOUSLY FRESH AND FAMILIAR WITH STREET FIGHTER 6



THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

BY BRIAN SHEA

Each mainline entry of the Street Fighter series is an important milestone in the fighting game genre. Though every numbered entry received critical acclaim, Street Fighter V sticks out among fans as the outlier of the series; the game experienced perhaps the most tumultuous launch of any Street Fighter game to date. But out of that trouble emerged something great. Thanks to the team's persistence, post-launch roadmap, and an injection of new blood into the project's leadership, Street Fighter V drastically improved its core gameplay, online play, content offerings, and more throughout its six-year lifespan.

With the benefit of those lessons learned, many team members that righted the ship are back to develop Street Fighter 6. The latest entry delivers myriad improvements, new features, and a sleek new aesthetic while simultaneously acknowledging and paying homage to each entry before it. Street Fighter 6 feels like yet another evolution of the fighting game genre ushered in by the franchise that pioneered it in the first place.

We've already spent hours playing Street Fighter 6 thanks to an October closed beta test and several summer trade expos like Summer Game Fest and Tokyo Game Show, but we wanted to learn more. We traveled to Capcom's headquarters in Osaka, Japan, to get more hands-on time and learn the inside story about Street Fighter 6 from the passionate team making it.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** 2023

A RETURNING COMBO

In 2018, Capcom began thinking about what it wanted to do for the next Street Fighter. DLC plans on Street Fighter V were cut short, but the title was experiencing a resurgence thanks to its post-launch updates and fixes. Two of the prominent figureheads of that turnaround, director Takayuki Nakayama and producer Shuhei Matsumoto, were placed in those same roles for Street Fighter 6.

With much of the old guard, including Street Fighter V figurehead Yoshinori Ono [read more on p. 32], no longer involved in the franchise, the series was at a crossroads. Just as the shift in Street Fighter V upended Capcom's fighting game development team, Street Fighter 6 ushers in an entirely new era for the franchise. Nakayama and Matsumoto brought sorely needed fresh perspectives to the table, energizing the development team in the process.

The Street Fighter team decided to build on those successes from V while learning from every other game before it. The comparisons to Street Fighter III, with its parrying system, Street Fighter V, with its modern style of fighting, and Street Fighter Alpha, with its multi-tiered super gauges, are evident for longtime fans. But it's the most iconic entry in the series that inspired the team the most.

"The concept I received from Nakayama-san was that we wanted to take it back to almost what it was during the Street Fighter II era," says producer Kazuhiro Tsuchiya, who has been with Capcom for more than three decades. "We wanted to make another Street Fighter game that's not just for existing fans of the series, but for everyone and get that same feeling where all types of gamers are falling in love with fighting games ... with Street Fighter. When that concept was brought up by Nakayama-san, it resonated very strongly with me. It is a challenge, but it's a challenge worth taking."

Street Fighter 6 takes cues from those past games but ups the ante by adding several new modes and features on top of the terrific 2D fighting the series is known for – a tall ask from the relatively less-experienced team. "It took time for us to convince certain people – decision-makers – outside of the team to explain why these new features are so necessary," Nakayama says. "We are trying to accomplish a lot in comparison to other fighting games, but we want Street Fighter 6 to be important and maybe a gateway for a lot of people to get themselves involved and excited about a fighting game."

Tsuchiya used his veteran savvy to give the team the wide berth needed to deliver on this vision. He began advocating and fighting for the core development team to prevent the unrealistic deadlines and release expectations of past games. According to Tsuchiya, he's successfully prevented a repeat of V's launch.

"It's very rare to see games come to fruition where they were able to deliver everything the team was aiming for," Tsuchiya says. "There's always some sort of compromise that had to be made or ideas that had to be scrapped due to budget, schedule, resource issues. But for this time around, regarding the fundamental things that Nakayama-san wanted to accomplish with his dream project, it seems like we haven't really had to make any sorts of omissions or compromises for this title."

Thanks to the backing of Capcom leadership, the Street Fighter 6 development team has been able to capitalize and create something it feels is extraordinary, even in the context of one of the most beloved series in video games. With a new era of developers ready to usher in a new generation of Street Fighter, the sixth mainline entry gives fans something that feels like a 360-degree view of the franchise – something that pulls from those previous games while also giving players something wholly fresh and modern. Street Fighter 6 is ambitious, but through strong gameplay and a seemingly realized vision, it's poised to deliver on those promises.

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DRIVE TO SURVIVE

Street Fighter 6 pulls from individual entries of the series to create its fighting style, but at its core, the gameplay feels like a culmination of the series to this point. Players still have access to the light, medium, and heavy attacks of past games, as well as throws and special moves that require specific inputs to pull off; throwing a Hadoken or Shoryuken feels as good as it did in the '90s. On top of those core mechanics, Street Fighter 6 adds a new Drive system, which operates on a meter featuring six segments.

This Drive meter is similar to a stamina system, as each Drive move you pull off depletes segments of your constantly recharging supply. In addition to preventing players from spamming the powerful Drive moves and requiring them to think strategically, this also lets fights get off to an action-packed start since you begin with your six bars fully charged.

"In comparison with Street Fighter V, the intention with the V-Trigger system was we wanted to have strong options towards the latter half of the match," Nakayama says. "We wanted to go a different route for 6, having all that excitement and freedom from the very beginning of the fight."

Since these Drive bars allow access to different styles of moves, it plays into one of the development team's main goals: giving players the freedom to play how they want. Players can use each of those meter segments as they need. For example, the defensive Drive Parry lets you deflect incoming attacks if timed right. At the same time, Drive Rush enables you to run forward out of an attack or parry for more combo opportunities. Meanwhile, those who want to go on the offensive can activate Drive Impact, which explodes with a splash of paint and can continue through an opponent's attack. The suite rounds out with Overdrives, powerful variants of special moves like EX moves in past games.

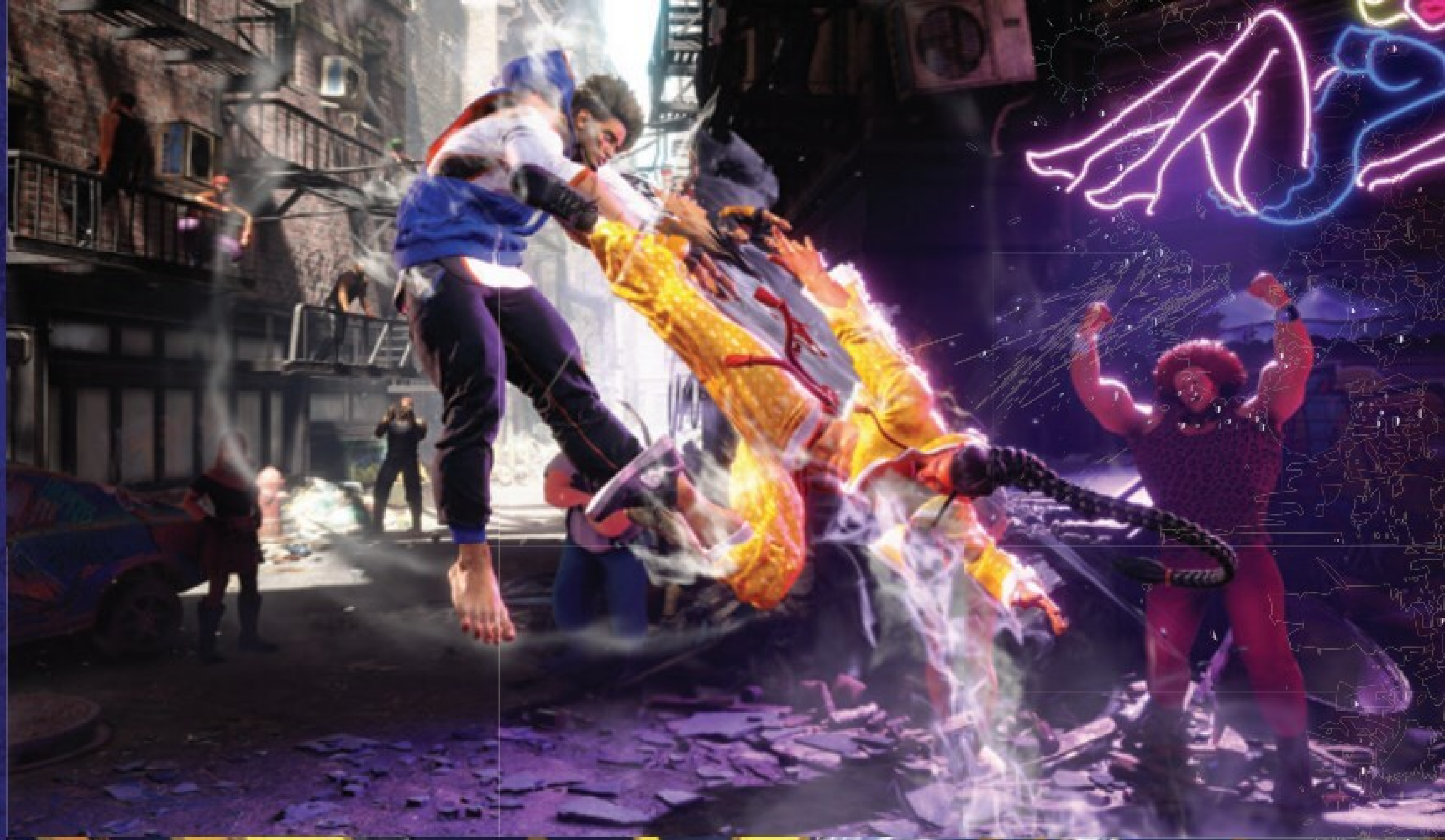
Even with minimal Drive System experience, I used it to great effect. Though Drive Parry feels like it will have the widest utility in disrupting my opponents' attack flow, the highlights of my matches involved pulling off powerful Overdrive moves just as my opponent thought they were getting the upper hand. With how effective this system was for me in the short time I experimented with it, I can't wait to fully explore just how impactful it is once I come closer to mastering its intricacies.

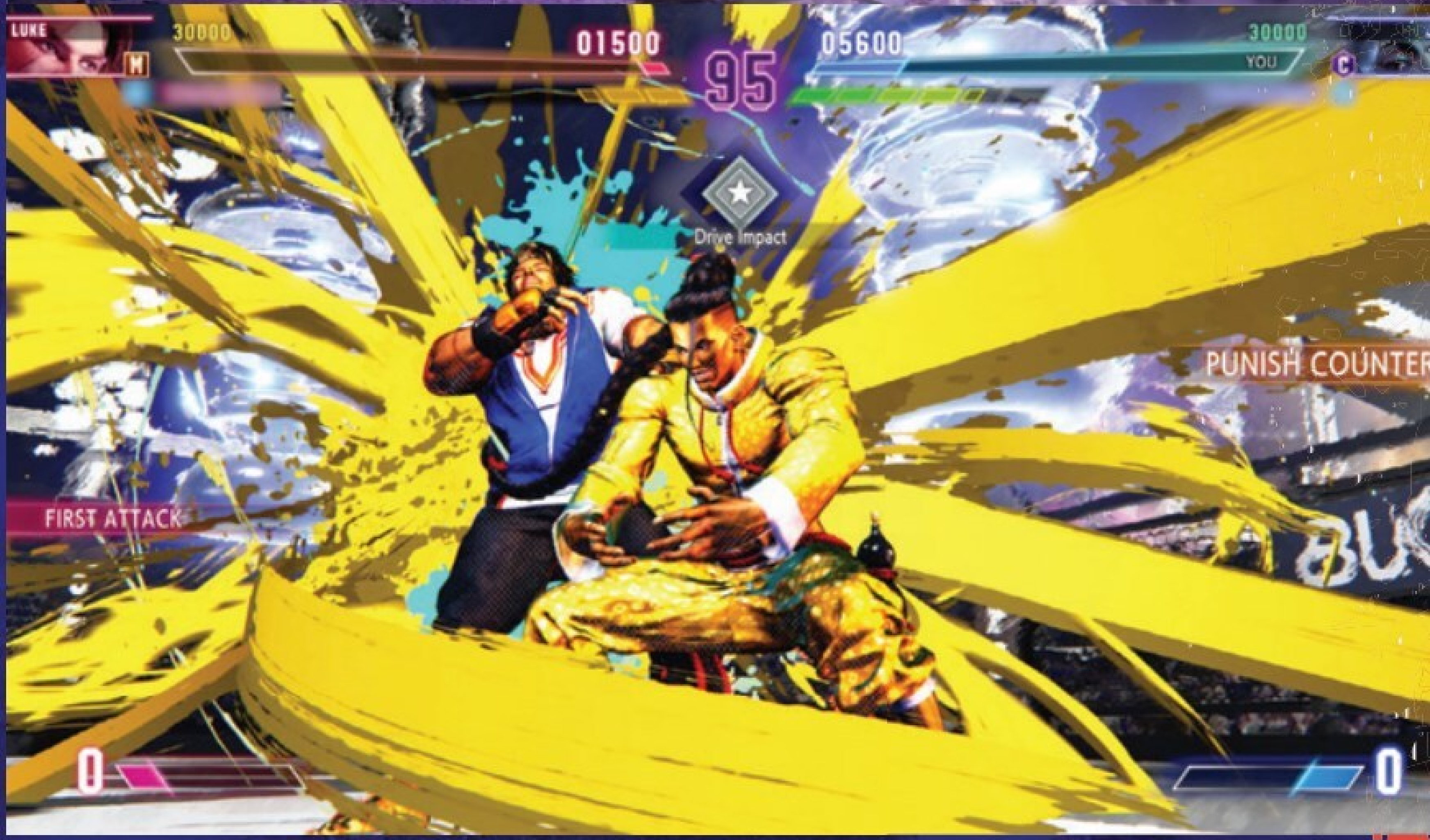
"One of the things we felt that was important to do was to make the actual moves associated with this system relatively easy to perform," Nakayama says. "That's something we prioritized.

It's a deep and complex system but relatively simple in execution."

Stacked on top of the Drive mechanic is the return of Super Arts. These moves, which debuted in Street Fighter III, pull additional influence from the Alpha series' combo system. Each character has three distinct Super Arts that characters can pull off within matches. Overdrive moves take the place of EX Specials from past games (and that mechanic is tied to a separate gauge), meaning Street Fighter 6's Super Arts grant players more freedom of when they want to use it.

All these mechanics coalesce to create a satisfying and tight fighting system that feels terrific in motion. I loved combining the various Drive tactics and the Super Arts to hone what will eventually be my fighting style when the game comes out. By combining these moves with the rest of the tools at my disposal, I already felt like a better player than I've been with previous Street Fighter titles – a testament to how the team designed this game to be approachable. However, Capcom didn't stop there in making sure Street Fighter 6 is among the most player-friendly entries in series history.





MODERN DYNAMISM

One of the primary goals of Street Fighter 6 is to make the title something everyone, regardless of ability, can enjoy. While the Drive system is as approachable as new mechanics come in the series, Nakayama and his team came up with one way to ensure the most expansive collection of players could have fun with Street Fighter 6: different control types. The developers created three distinct control options, each catering to a different audience.

Classic controls give you the most traditional gameplay, while Modern controls remap and simplify gameplay. With Modern controls, throws, special moves, Drive Parry, and Drive Impact are mapped to single buttons and triggers, with buttons for kicks and punches replaced with single buttons for agnostic light, medium, and heavy attacks.

The point of Modern controls wasn't to deliver an "easy mode" but rather to give those less familiar with fighting games another option to jump into the fun while still requiring skill. "We have to consider that this series has been going on for 35 years now, and someone who's been playing the games for 35 years might know a little more than someone who's never touched a Street Fighter game," Nakayama says.

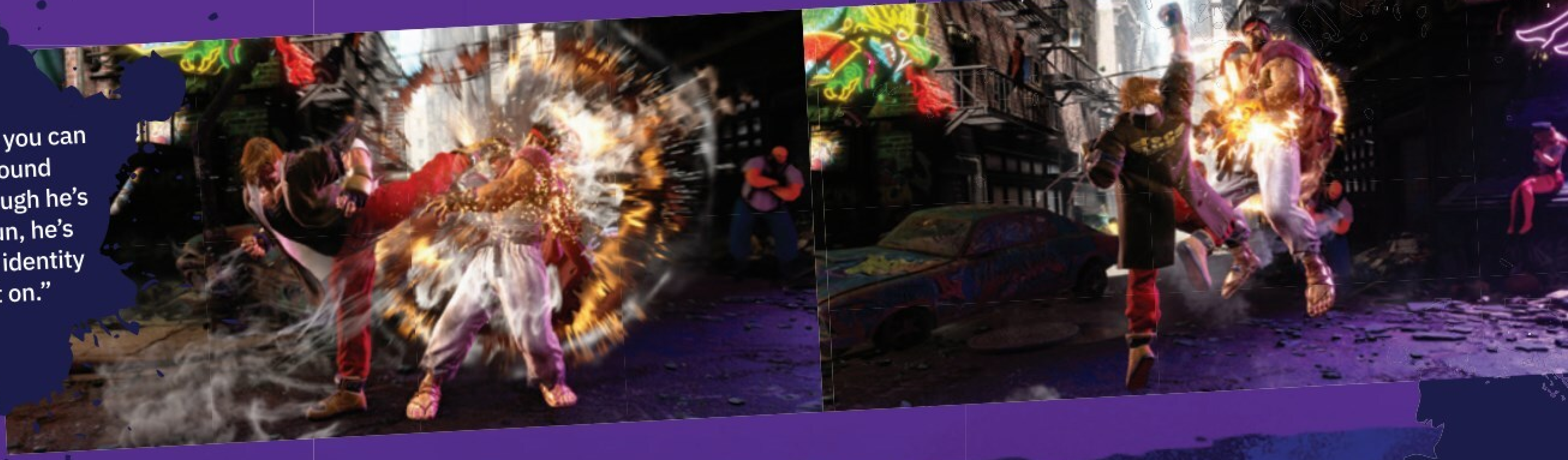
Modern controls work across all game modes, which raises concerns about competitive integrity. After all, how would two equally matched players stack up if one uses a simplified control scheme? Currently, the team is exploring options like making Modern control specials weaker, so players are encouraged to use the inputs, or making it so it doesn't allow you to select between low, medium, or high of the special move. But since Classic controls already offer more precision in selecting your attacks, the team isn't overly concerned about competitive imbalance.

Though Modern controls may sound like training wheels in some ways, Nakayama says there will never be any pressure from the game for players to "graduate" to Classic controls. In fact, Nakayama imagines high-level players could excel in a competitive setting using Modern controls. "We feel that if a player is comfortable with Modern Controls and they're happy with that, then that's totally fine," he says. "It's not like the game is going to encourage you to go into playing Classic because that's 'better.' The goal is to give different options to different players, regardless of skill type. It's going to be based on what they feel comfortable playing."

MASTERS OF DISGUISE

One of the original World Warriors receives a hefty makeover for Street Fighter 6 due to his seemingly dire situation. Check out what art director Kaname Fujioka says about Ken's new look.

"We wanted to convey that he's on the run and probably being on the run barefooted might be a little bit tricky, I would imagine."



"In that screenshot, you can see his black belt around his arm, so even though he's technically on the run, he's still maintaining his identity by keeping that belt on."

In contrast to Classic and Modern controls, which are balanced against each other and meant to be competitive, Capcom also gave me a sneak peek at a third control option: Dynamic controls. This mode is meant to be closer to what players could consider an "easy" mode, as the A.I. essentially decides which attack to perform on your behalf as you press face buttons. Strategy still plays a role, and you still manually perform parries and move the character using the d-pad, but this mode caters to the world's button mashers.

"In a normal fighting game, when they [mash buttons], they just do a lot of whiffs," Nakayama says. "We wanted something important and something that makes a difference happen by randomly pressing buttons."

If a character is far away, pressing the face button might throw a projectile, while that same button might pull off a combo in an up-close encounter. The name "Dynamic" refers to the fact that the A.I. will perform different contextual actions based on the location and situation of the match when the buttons are pressed. Unlike Classic and Modern controls, which can be used in any mode, Dynamic is unavailable in online fights.

With these three control schemes in tow, Street Fighter 6 feels like the most approachable entry in the franchise. But maybe the most recognizable part of the series is not in its gameplay but in its cast of characters. Thankfully, the philosophies applied to the game's core mechanics – the classic inspiration, the fresh approach, and the widely appealing styles – all carry over into the art and characters of Street Fighter 6.

RETURN OF THE WORLD WARRIORS

As Capcom looked at the roster of characters it wanted to include in Street Fighter 6, it pulled from a selection of classic fighters and new faces. Debuting characters like Luke, Jamie, and Kimberly, offer unique personalities and fighting styles we haven't seen in past games. Meanwhile, Street Fighter II icons Ryu, Guile, Chun-Li, Dhalsim, and Blanka are all slated to return, each sporting a new look to reflect their older stature during this latest point in the Street Fighter timeline.

Maybe the most significant departure from his classic style is Ken, who serves as a central character (though not the protagonist) in Street Fighter 6's story. As one of the two original playable characters in the series, alongside Ryu, fans have seen his complete evolution from Ryu's

"It's probably safe to say that there'll be more costumes down the line, but what we wanted to accomplish with this is [bringing] back that classic red dōgi Ken outfit within this more modern, high-fidelity graphical look."

"Even if he is technically on the run, he might be holding on to precious memorabilia and outfits, so this is him wearing one of them."

rival to husband of Eliza, father of Mel, and ex-vice president of the Masters Foundation. Street Fighter 6 ushers in a new chapter for the iconic combatant.

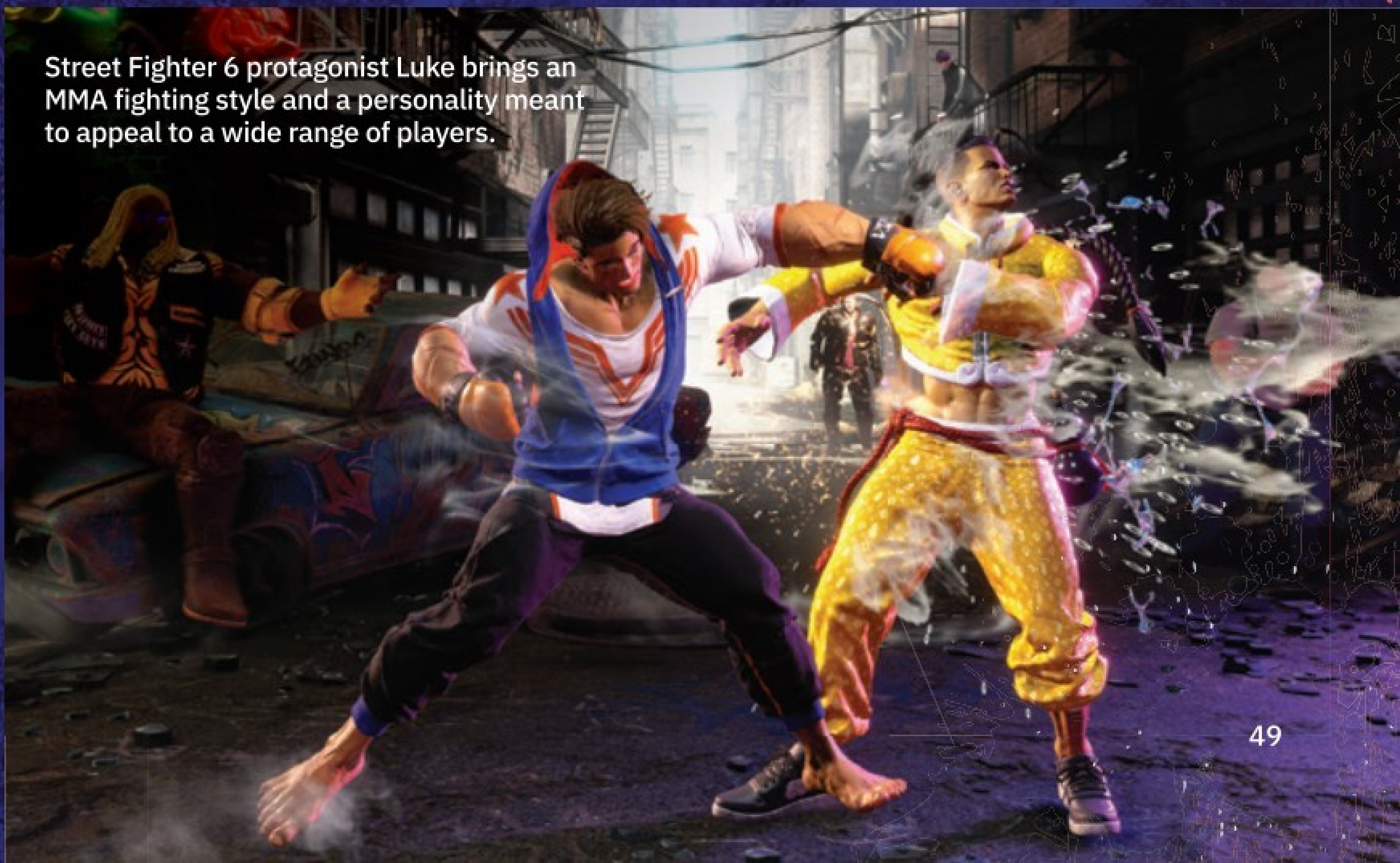
"Throughout the series, it seems like his life has become more and more stable, and the team felt like he was losing a reason to fight," Nakayama says. "But this is a way to create that reason for him to step up. We want to create that kind of plotline that explains why Ken is important and gives him more purpose. The story will be tied to those other characters close to him."

While Capcom is tight-lipped about why Ken is in these extraordinary circumstances, we know he's on the run from something. In early scenes from his Arcade mode story, we see him apprehended and interrogated about a terrorist bombing. Ken's backstory will be fleshed out through a special four-issue comic series with longtime Capcom collaborator UDON Entertainment.

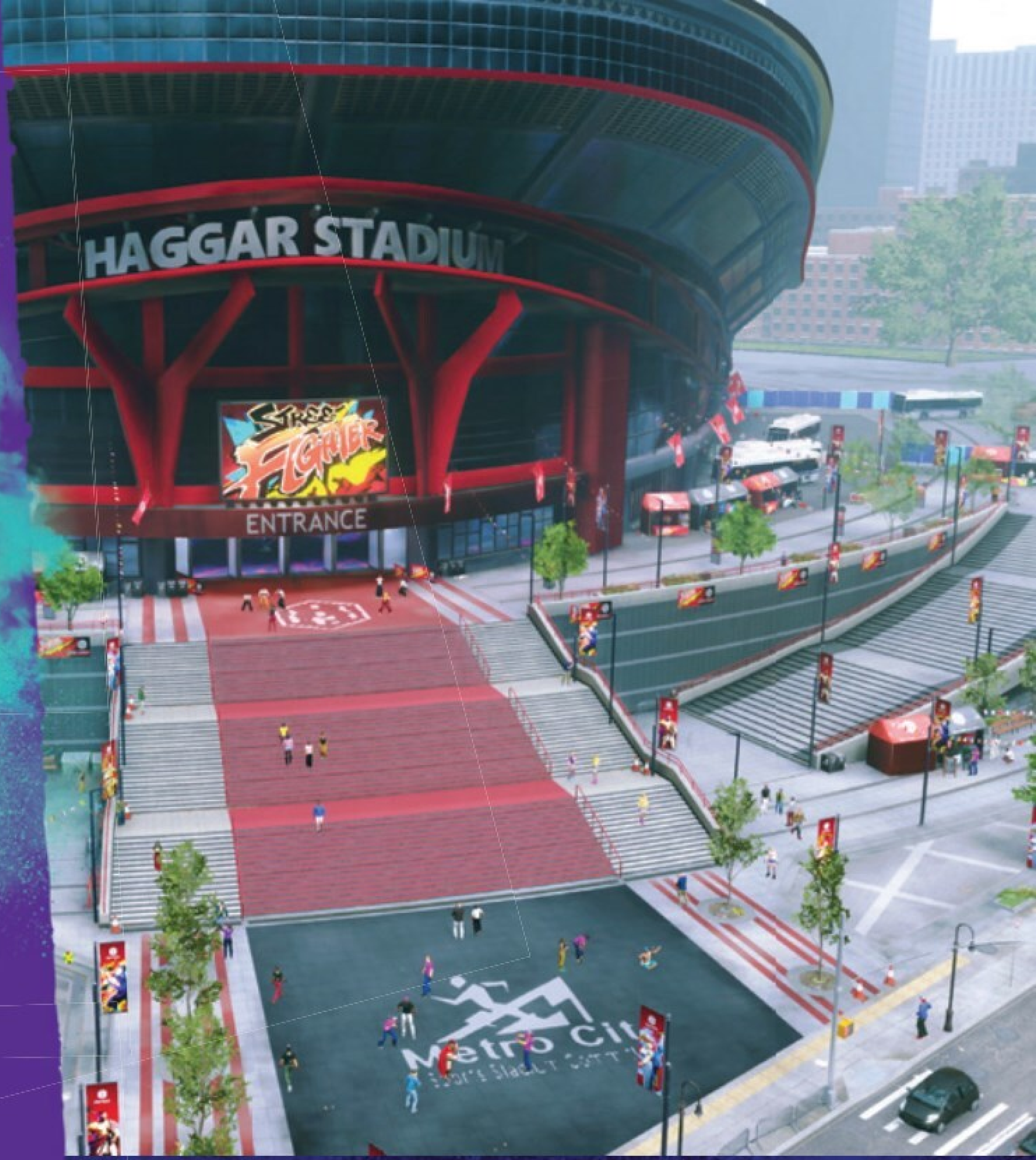
"This is the first time that we're doing this kind of comic book series that's closely tied to the story of the main game," Nakayama says. "We're working very closely with our partners at UDON. We're providing the script and the storyline of what to expect before the events of Street Fighter 6. They're going to be helping us to create the storylines. Beyond that, they're even looking into possible spin-offs and collaborating with the scriptwriters on the team, so there may be more stuff beyond just the initial comic book series."

The main protagonist of Street Fighter 6, Luke, also plays a major role in the prequel comic series. Luke is the first instructor to the avatar character you create in World Tour, the story-based action mode, giving him a prominent place in the story.

Speaking of your avatar, Street Fighter 6 offers robust customization options for you to create your character in World Tour. Throughout this mode, you travel the world, interacting with, fighting, and learning from the iconic Street Fighter cast, starting with Metro City.



Street Fighter 6 protagonist Luke brings an MMA fighting style and a personality meant to appeal to a wide range of players.



A SPLASH OF COLOR

In lockstep with Capcom's mission to create something widely appealing, Street Fighter 6's art style is downright striking. The style takes various inspirations from street culture, which art director Kaname Fujioka feels is the natural progression of the themes in games stretching as far back as Street Fighter I and II.

"We understood that it matched the overall theme for the series, so we put in the effort to keep that relevancy and to make it appear as strongly within Street Fighter 6 as well," Fujioka says. "Besides the street culture and hip-hop aesthetic, another thing that we were inspired by and referred to a lot with the design aesthetics was real-life sports and real-life fighting events, whether it be MMA or pro wrestling."

This fight-sport influence is perhaps most on display through new walkout cutscenes where the characters enter the arena together before the fight. The characters each have distinct animations that play into their personalities, such as Ryu remaining focused and stoic or Juri taunting her opponent every step of the way.

"During those scenes, we wanted to have personality and character to the characters, so that their movements and what they do during the animation is a strong expression of who those characters are," Fujioka says. "We try to do the homework and research to see how they do that in real life and apply that to the game."

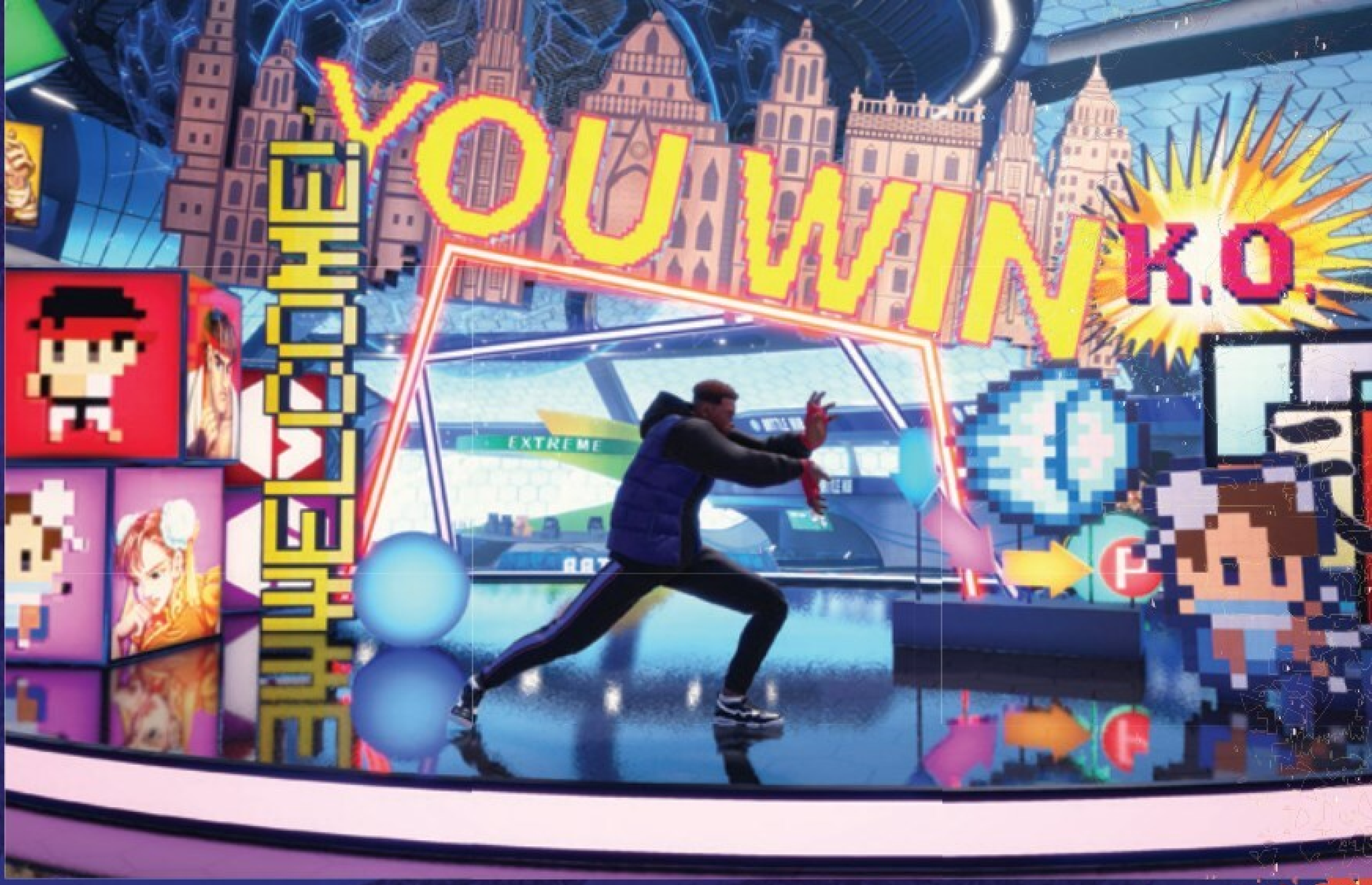
World Tour offers a unique experience that lets you explore an open area as your custom avatar. Here, you experience the story while also learning the ropes of Street Fighter 6. Nakayama teases that while learning the techniques of your favorite fighters is rewarding, the extra lore drops will also appease longtime fans.

World Tour is the primary vehicle for players to experience the story, but it's not the only way, as players can dive into Arcade mode to further experience the story focused on their chosen fighter. Meanwhile, Fighting Ground offers straightforward fights as well as Training and Extreme Battles, where fighters must compete with obstacles like a bull running through the stage or objects players can attack to ricochet into their opponents.

Maybe the most substantial new mode for longtime players is Battle Hub, a big, open area modeled after an arena, where players can be social with others online using their avatars. Drawing heavy inspiration from the esports and arcade scenes, Capcom wants to create an area that feels like a good place for players to gather, play with each other, and learn new information about the game.

The biggest inspiration for Battle Hub was born from the team's desire to be social when it was largely inadvisable to do so in real life. "Especially with COVID, there's not many opportunities to go to arcades and socialize with your friends," Matsumoto says. "So, we felt like, 'What if we made an online version of an arcade? Are we able to do that within Street Fighter?' That was a challenge we wanted to take on and recreate because we grew up in the era of going to arcades with our friends, and that's something we have fond memories of."

If you want to take a break from Street Fighter 6, you can even compete with other players for high scores on classic games like Final Fight and Street Fighter II in the Game Center of the Battle Hub. Players can also spectate any match in the hub, a longtime and vital component of the fighting game genre over the years.



FROM THE SIDELINES

Battle Hub plays into a sentiment that permeated nearly every part of my conversations with the development team: Capcom understands people love watching Street Fighter. That's why it created a specific color language in its Drive System to let players know what is happening. For example, Drive Parry has a blue color scheme, Drive Rush has a green aura, and Drive Impact splashes the screen with character-specific colors. "We want to make it easier to tell from a player perspective, but beyond that, even if you're not playing and you're just kind of watching, we wanted to emphasize those points for viewers, so they know what's happening based on what they see in the game colorwise," art director Kaname Fujioka says.

Not only that, but the developer implemented a new way for spectators to remain clued into the action happening on screen: Real-time Commentary. This new addition allows players to create their dream commentary team from established esports and entertainment voices. By selecting (or deselecting) two in-game commentators, players get a similar experience as they might when watching a streamed fighting game tournament. The commentary adds some esports flavor to the fights and helps educate the players and spectators.

"What the developers smartly did was pepper in educational lines," esports color commentator and Street Fighter 6 in-game analyst James Chen says. "The lines are mostly spoken by the main commentators like Vicious and Tasty Steve and Aru, while my part is largely just color commentary. But it's a nice, subtle way of teaching beginner players higher level concepts, like making sure they anti-air opponents who jump at them and such."

The commentary reacts in real-time to the action on screen, even escalating in intensity as the rounds progress. Capcom worked closely with Japanese commentator Aru to figure out the system behind it and figure out how to correctly incorporate the idea. While the obvious analog for this concept is sports games, Nakayama and his team drew more inspiration from esports events and thinking about how less-skilled players would enjoy having their matches called by their favorite commentators. The result feels potentially revolutionary, giving more insight into the on-screen action than ever. Esports are relatively young in the grand scheme of things, but Street Fighter 6 uses this convention to such a significant effect that it's almost shocking the genre has never done it to this extent.

THE ANSWER LIES IN THE HEART OF BATTLE

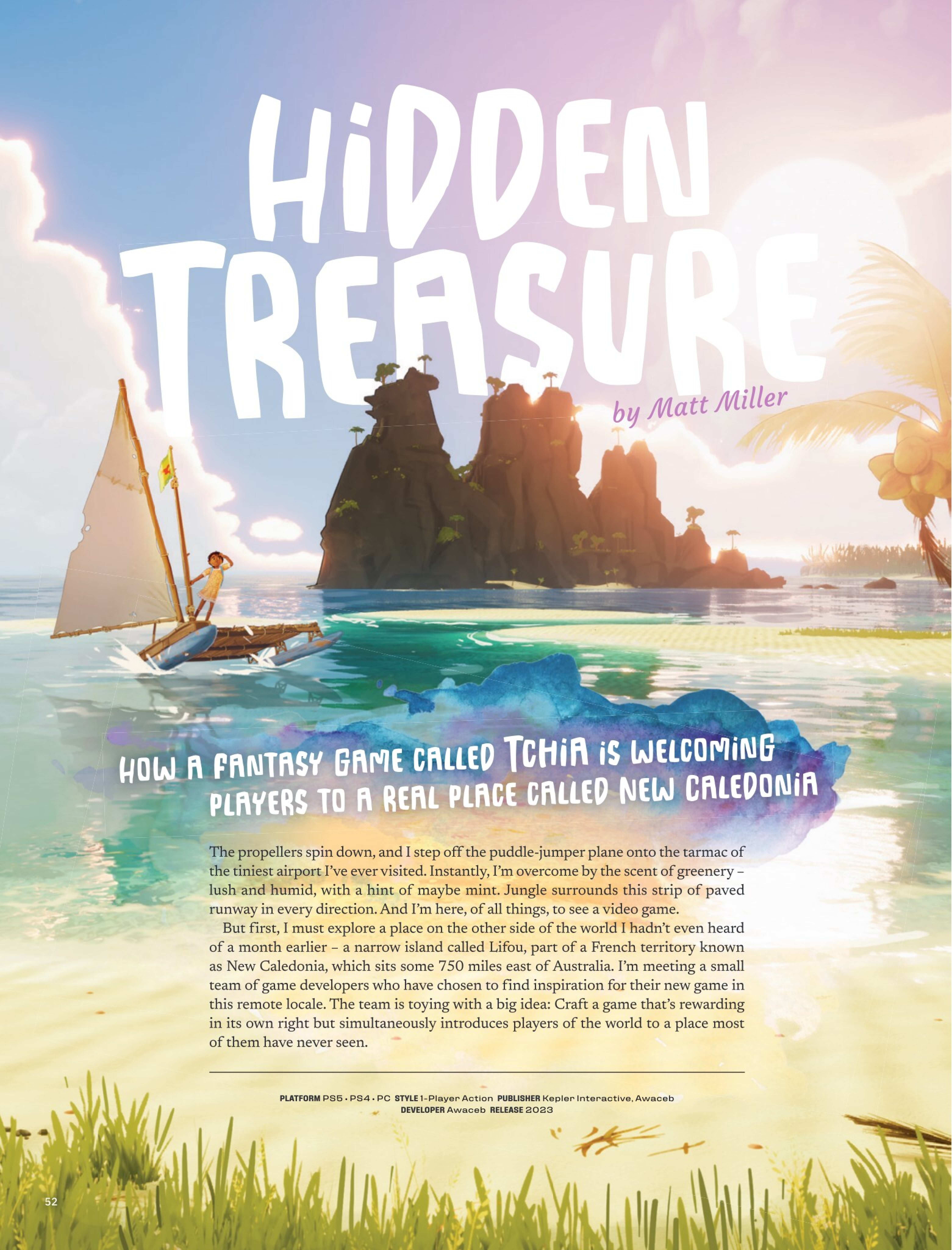
There's a saying in MMA, adapted from a famous Nelson Mandela quote: You either win or you learn. Street Fighter V may not have been the win Capcom was looking for when it initially launched, but by listening to fans, extracting the right lessons, and course-correcting, the developer appears ready to deliver the next truly great entry in its legendary fighting game franchise.

Of course, with how much Street Fighter V improved, thanks to the post-release title and content updates, Capcom will continue to iterate on Street Fighter 6 for years after its 2023 launch. The main difference this time is Street Fighter 6 feels like it is already in a much better position than V was in the ramp-up to its release.

"This time around, we're preparing more staff members on the development team, compared to the people who worked on the post-launch content for Street Fighter V, to prepare content for 6," Tsuchiya says. "I can't talk about the specifics of the post-launch content; it's safe to say we are aiming to deliver updates in the future, sometime after the release of Street Fighter 6 to deliver more content, whether it be characters or stages and whatnot."

With the likelihood of starting in a much better position than its now-well-liked predecessor and the potential benefit of post-launch evolution, the sky is the limit for Street Fighter 6. We won't know how Street Fighter 6 will turn out until next year when the game launches, but for now, the franchise's future looks as bright as its past. ■

For more exclusive Street Fighter 6 content, including a rapid-fire video interview and a video of Nakayama and Matsumoto playing SF in an Osaka arcade, head to GameInformer.com/StreetFighter6



HIDDEN TREASURE

by Matt Miller

HOW A FANTASY GAME CALLED TCHIA IS WELCOMING PLAYERS TO A REAL PLACE CALLED NEW CALEDONIA

The propellers spin down, and I step off the puddle-jumper plane onto the tarmac of the tiniest airport I've ever visited. Instantly, I'm overcome by the scent of greenery – lush and humid, with a hint of maybe mint. Jungle surrounds this strip of paved runway in every direction. And I'm here, of all things, to see a video game.

But first, I must explore a place on the other side of the world I hadn't even heard of a month earlier – a narrow island called Lifou, part of a French territory known as New Caledonia, which sits some 750 miles east of Australia. I'm meeting a small team of game developers who have chosen to find inspiration for their new game in this remote locale. The team is toying with a big idea: Craft a game that's rewarding in its own right but simultaneously introduces players of the world to a place most of them have never seen.

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Kepler Interactive, Awaceb
DEVELOPER Awaceb **RELEASE** 2023

Thierry Boura and Phil Crifo grew up in New Caledonia. Co-founders of the studio Awaceb, the childhood friends eventually moved to France to work in gaming. It's clear their childhood home left an impression. When determining a direction for the team's debut game, vague allusions to their island home weren't going to be enough. Instead, that game, Tchia, began to take shape as a love letter to their birthplace.

Tchia is one of those indie games reaching beyond the limits of how that descriptor is often applied, with a scope and ambition that belies the small team size. Players take on the titular role of Tchia, a young girl living in relative isolation with her father on a tiny but idyllic island paradise. Interrupting their peaceful life, a supernaturally powered being kidnaps her father, and Tchia is forced to set out on a grand adventure to save him.

At first glance, it's easy to see why Tchia has drawn comparisons to Nintendo's Zelda franchise. Mechanically, the game draws undeniable inspiration. Tchia's actions, like climbing mountains and gliding down from high vantage points, are governed by a stamina meter, like in Breath of the Wild. Tchia plays the ukulele with magical tunes that alter her surroundings, like changing the time of day, recalling Ocarina of Time. And she freely sails between islands on a ship in sequences that evoke Wind Waker. While acknowledging the connections, creative director Phil Crifo thinks the true inspiration lies more in shared goals between the two.

"Miyamoto once said that he was inspired by exploring caves when he was a kid," Crifo says. "And what we're doing is trying to show what it was like exploring New Caledonia when we were kids."

At the same time, after diving into hands-on time with the game, it's clear that Tchia's journey of discovery also veers from Link's adventures in Hyrule in crucial ways. Tchia is far less focused on combat. It's a frequently quieter game punctuated by moments of childlike whimsy and action – diving from a cliffside into seawater far below or tumbling headlong down a hill at breakneck speeds. Even with elements of magic and wonder, it's a game that feels rooted in a real place and authentic people.

After arriving on Lifou Island, I join members of the Awaceb development team in their rental cars as they venture deeper into the island. The roads here are tight and often covered in dirt; the jungle encroaches close on each side. Pedestrians wave in a friendly manner from the street sides. Scattered family homes represent breaks in the wilderness, a carving back of the trees, often creating a set of small, interconnected, covered spaces for dining and sitting, set alongside sturdy conical traditional huts, sometimes with small modern buildings nearby.

You wouldn't call Lifou heavily developed. While the native people don't appear to be living affluently, there's a clear sense of community, interconnection, and shared joy in living intimately within a bountiful nature while relying on one another.

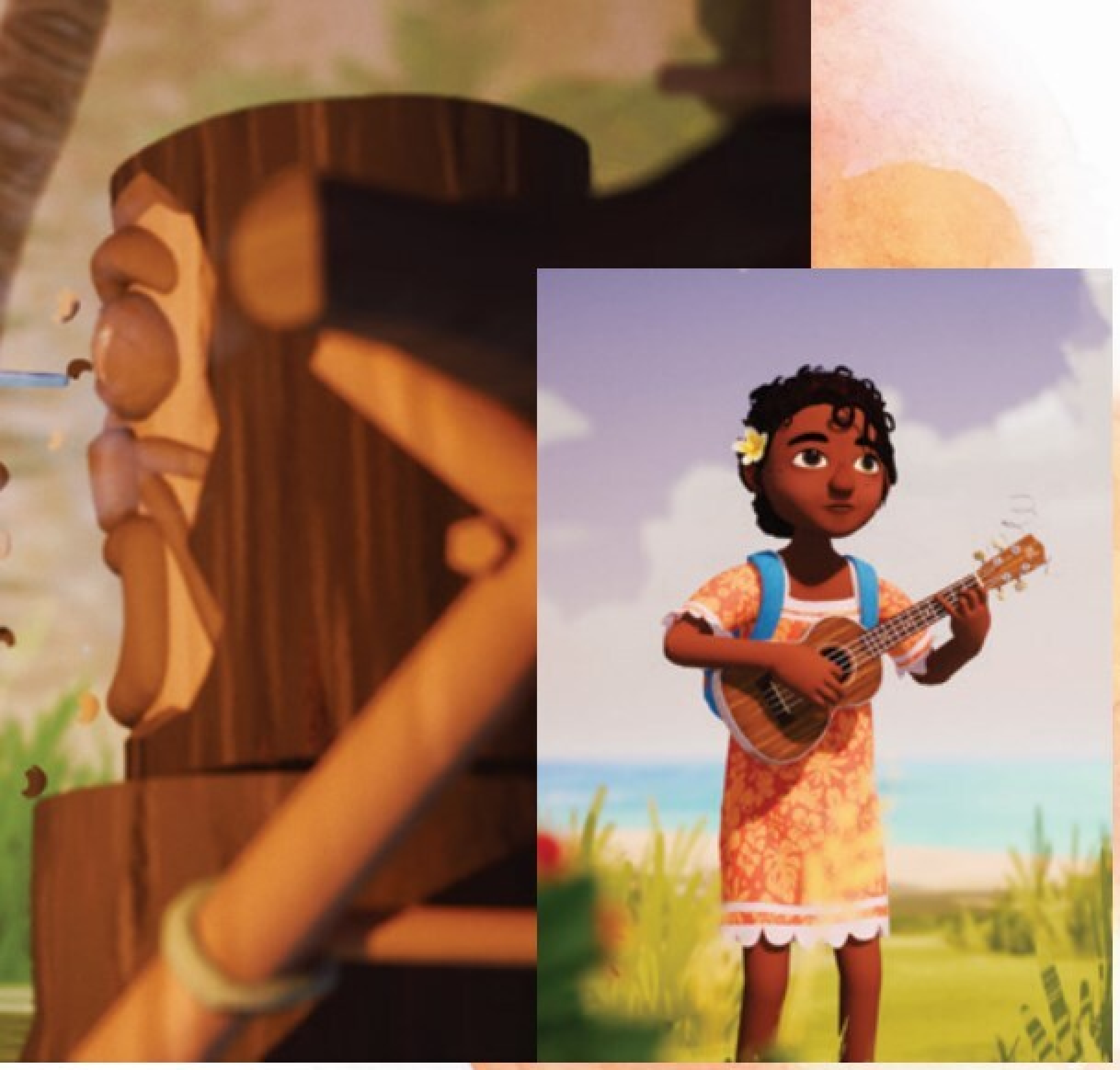
Lifou is a cultural hub for the native Kanak culture, a refuge from the more urbanized mainland of New Caledonia. The area hosts dozens of native languages, but the most common here is Drehu, a beautiful, vowel-rich, and flowing tongue that's fascinating to listen to, even though I don't speak a word. I find it especially intriguing as some individuals move between French and Drehu with ease, comfortable with the duality.

No matter where you might eventually play it in the world, Tchia plays out that duality through recorded and spoken dialogue using the same mix of Drehu and French. Awaceb went to great pains to find fluent voice actors to get Drehu script sections to sound right. Most estimate overall fluency in the language is only in the tens of thousands. "It was super hard," Crifo says. "There were no professional actors. So it was just wild guessing. Someone knows someone who has done commercials? Sure. And you find them and have lunch with them, and you go to their place, and sometimes they have no idea what a video game is."

The resulting vocal tracks, accompanied by an especially moving musical score, pay off remarkably well. The game feels grounded by the unconventional language decision, furthering the sense that you're visiting a place you've never been.

Almost the entire development team from Awaceb has made the trip to New Caledonia; only a couple team members are absent as they tour far-away Montreal for an impending studio move to that city. For those who have come, this trip serves multiple purposes. It's a chance for individuals to see and experience the place they've been building a game around for years. It's a reward for that hard work. But it's also meant to serve that essential task of showing the game to local residents who helped inspire it and affirming their approval.

I'm standing outside one of Lifou's cultural hubs, a meeting hall for significant events for the Kanak people. Today, the interior has been given over to posters and artwork depicting Tchia and her exploits. A monitor has been raised that plays an extended trailer of the game. Tables are set up for the local kids to complete art projects.



Outside, Phil Crifo is anxious; he says he's more nervous to do what comes next than when he presented Tchia at Gamescom. In addition to the slowly gathering crowd of families, official representatives of the Kanak people have come to hear from Crifo and see Tchia. Crifo is expected to perform the Coutume, a deeply valued ritual within the culture that serves as a gesture of respect for helping or hosting, which includes exchanging gifts and a heartfelt expression of mutual appreciation from both parties. It's fair to presume that, in this instance, ignorance of the tradition would not be a good look for the studio or the game.

Inside, a surprising influx of kids has overwhelmed the art tables, laughing and painting. A small gathering of curly-haired girls sits on a rug in front of the monitor. They're watching the curly-haired girl on the video go on a thrilling adventure in a place that looks much like where they live. The girls follow it on repeat, rapt.

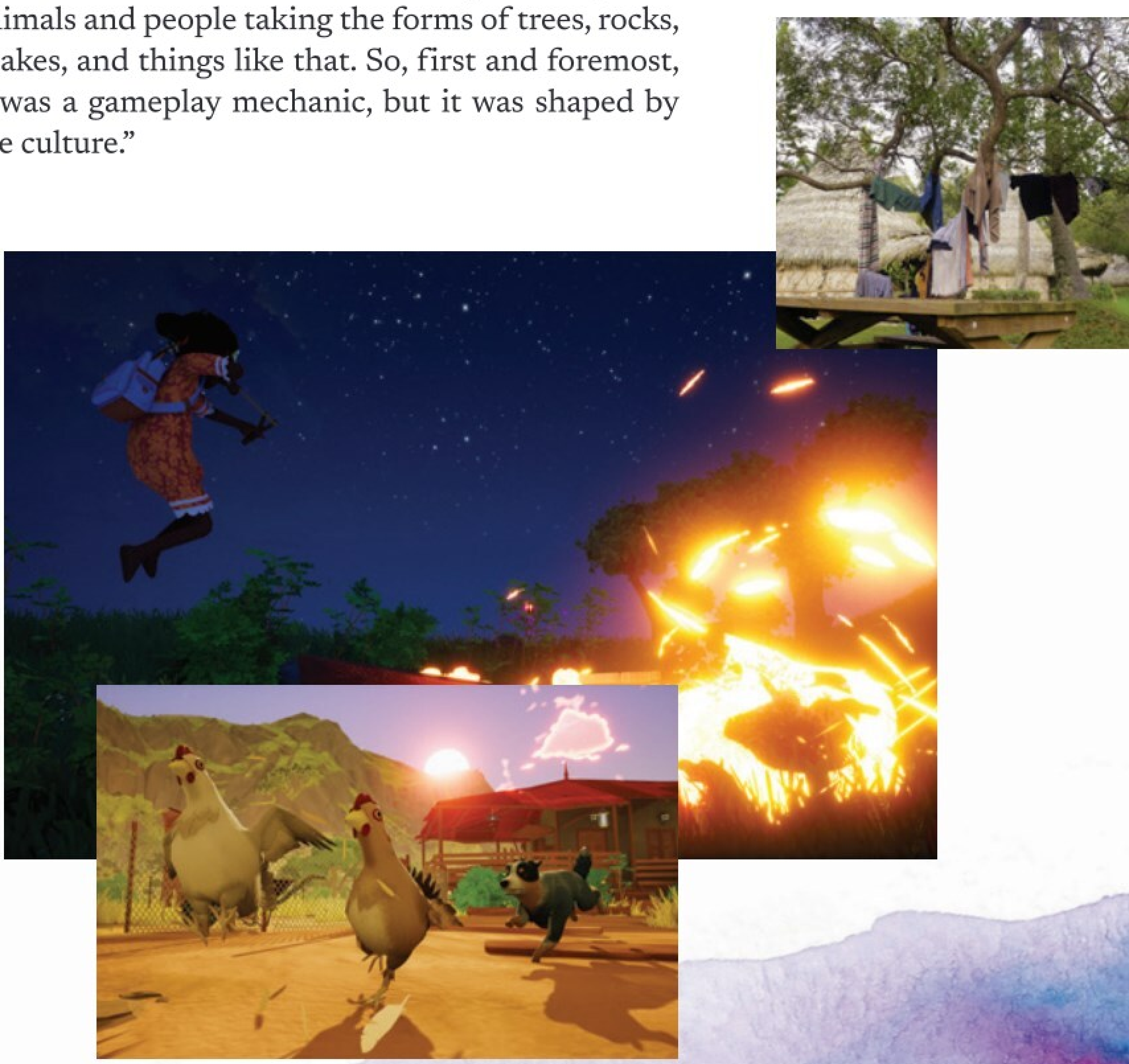
As the main hall grows quiet for the ritual, Crifo launches into the Coutume. After saying his part, Kanak representatives respond in kind, thanking him and recognizing the developer's work. Afterward, Crifo seems flustered, like he messed it all up. But the indigenous Kanak leaders he was speaking to seem happy. Everyone looks pleased about how Tchia is presenting elements inspired by their homeland.

Smaller, more intimate instances of the ritual follow in subsequent days – in a high school classroom, at a hosted dinner for the team, and so on. But even without the language expertise to parse the words, it always comes across as a heartfelt, if formal, expression of gratitude and shared appreciation. The Kanak people seem to view humility and thankfulness as profoundly valued traits. I find the observance refreshing and welcoming.

In the game, the Coutume ceremony is represented with a similar level of importance and frequency. Tchia is regularly tasked with finding appropriate gifts to bring to a particular Coutume, and we see the abbreviated versions of the ritual play out in cinematic sequences. In one instance, the game's chief villain appears to be perverting the Coutume by simply using it to get richer and get the gifts he wants; the message is clear that he has entirely missed the point.

In my hours playing Tchia, it's clear that the messages of the Coutume and the attitudes of the Kanak people extend to broader themes in the game. Tchia is a quiet and humble hero with a shy smile and a playful spirit. "She's very curious and a bit naïve because she's discovering the world as we go," Crifo says. "She's lived all her life on a small island and is now sent on this adventure without being really prepared for it." The missions she undertakes are often about bringing people together – like two villages that are each convinced the other hates them, but Tchia helps break those walls down. She's joyful as she sails along coral reefs and explores shady forests, interacting with the natural world as she goes.

That sense of harmonious reciprocity extends into the game's most prominent supernatural mechanic – soul-jumping. Tchia can transfer her consciousness into animals and objects around her, from rocks to birds, and have brief periods where she perceives the world through their eyes, and acts as they do, enabling new forms of locomotion, exploration, and discovery. "Like pretty much everything we design in the game, we cross-reference it to cultural stuff from New Caledonia," Crifo says. "A lot of local folklore is about shapeshifting, like animals and people taking the forms of trees, rocks, snakes, and things like that. So, first and foremost, it was a gameplay mechanic, but it was shaped by the culture."



The most unusual and interesting person I meet on my trip is a man named Thoane. He's immediately welcoming and friendly, with deep smile lines around his eyes and a jovial nature that invites conversation. A native Kanak who lives here on Lifou, he's pulling multiple duties in his involvement with the Awaceb development team. Thoane is a chief cultural consultant, helping to ensure the team members accurately present aspects of Kanak life and language. He also plays a significant voice-acting role in the game, speaking and singing as Tre, a family friend to Tchia and her father. And for this trip, he's our guide on Lifou, taking us on expeditions into the wilderness and even welcoming us to his home for traditional meals.

On the day after the big Coutume ceremony, Thoane takes us on a hike into the jungle. He's barefoot despite the rough terrain and carries a machete to chop back overgrowth as we go. He pauses from time to time to share ancient Kanak mythology with the development team – stories of creation and life birthed from trees and islands that spring from cakes of earth thrown into the sea. We descend a winding path over roots and past banyans to a hidden bay near the tip of Lifou and a set of temporary shelters that serve as a home base to a popular snorkeling destination. The coral reefs are beautiful, but it's a windy day on the water; I manage to get thoroughly scraped up against sharp rocks and coral while I swim. As I emerge onto the beach, bloodied from numerous cuts, Thoane calmly gathers a handful of distinct leaves from the jungle. He starts a fire, heats the leaves to near-blackening, and motions for me to lay the leaves over my cuts. The bleeding stops. Afterward, with sea sounds in the background from the nearby shoreline, I have a chance to chat with him about his involvement with the game.

"The fact that the game has Drehu in it is very special," Thoane says through translation. "The project has a vision that projects beyond what is happening on the island to reach a worldwide audience. Kanak culture really values respect and unity. I take big pride that the world gets to experience some of that culture through the game." Thoane also seems especially keen on how the game can speak to a younger generation in the Kanak culture. "I'm hopeful that this project will spark young folks from the island to go ahead and create stuff inspired by this culture as well."

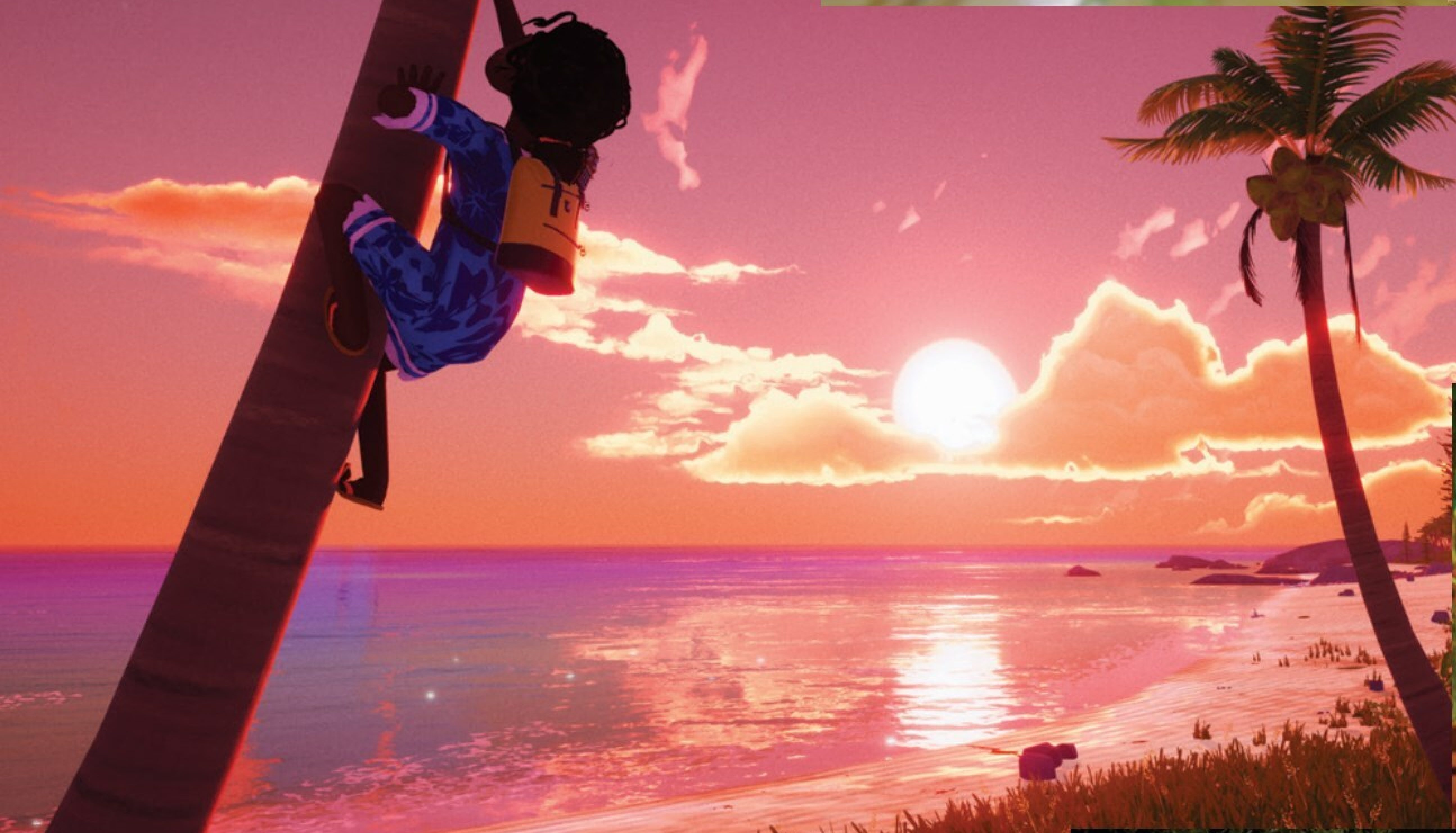
It would be a mistake to presume his perspective is necessarily representative of everyone in the broader Kanak people. But as an individual, there's a genuine joy in how Thoane talks about Tchia and how it surfaces his cultural background to people who may have never encountered it.

When I ask him about his voice role and singing in the game, he unabashedly launches into a hushed lullaby-like version of one of the songs from the game that his character sings. The lapping waves and nearby bird chirps are his accompaniment. As his hypnotic acapella winds down, a long moment of silence falls. I spot tears in the eyes of some of the Awaceb team members.

Tchia takes strong inspiration from the Kanak culture and the broader lands and French culture of New Caledonia. While the spoken language and some of the rituals directly nod to those places, Awaceb has carefully crafted a fictional world of its own. A city locale might be inspired by the urban capital of Nouméa on the main island, but it won't carry that name in the game. Like it is for the Kanak people, yams and fish are staples of Tchia's diet, but she won't be eating fish drawn from a real-life seaside or yams from a real farm. Tchia's world is a sort-of condensed and exaggerated take on New Caledonia, with its pink sunsets coloring the ocean, and heavy mists rising in the mornings. After less than a week in the actual place, I can sense how much Crifo has dug back into his childhood to capture what was special about his first home.

After several hours wandering the game, I'm struck by how much Tchia seems to reject many accepted pillars of modern gameplay convention. Objective markers are rare. The map offers a "where am I?" function, but Tchia simply circles a general area on her map and declares that she's "probably somewhere around here." If I need to find a pearl to give to someone, it's up to me to figure out that I need to dive into the nearby ocean and find a clam.

Minions of Meavora, the big bad guy of the game, are weirdly animated strips of cloth called Maano. They gather in small camps, like Bokoblin gatherings in Breath of the Wild. Clever power manipulation can take them out – like soul-jumping into an oil lamp and setting them alight. It's a flash of combat excitement in an otherwise relatively peaceful playthrough.



Most of my time in Tchia is spent exploring. Multiple islands are filled with activities to uncover, from races to treasure hunts. I pause to complete a slingshot target shooting range. I pull out my analog camera to take pictures. As I skim along the water in my sailing ship, I regularly leap into the blue water and deep below to find a chest of goodies. New costumes, ship decorations, and other cosmetic options open as rewards almost constantly, giving me new ways to style Tchia's hair or clothes.

The story progresses gradually, and lengthy spoken sequences are rare. Many characters seem to rely on shared experiences and music to relay emotion rather than overdone dialogue exchanges. When Tchia meets a girl at a rancher's village, few words pass between them, but they meet on a nearby mountaintop and sing together to cement their friendship. In moments like that, the game regularly relies on a simple but enjoyable rhythm game mechanic, in which Tchia can play her ukulele and strum different chords to play along with other musicians and singers.

"You cannot lose; you're not scored; we want them to be like mood setters," Crifo says. You can even skip those interactive musical events and watch them as cinematics. It's purely there to get you into the right frame of mind and relaxed into a slower pace of play. As a game, Tchia is not a sprint to the finish; it virtually demands that you take your time and let go of the frenetic pacing of many other interactive experiences. Multiple times when things run a bit late during my trip to Lifou, someone reminds me that everyone is on "island time." Tchia is a bit like an extended contemplation of the concept; everything moves at its own pace.

On my last night in New Caledonia, we're back on the main island, and Awaceb is hosting a party for local talent who participated in the game. Thoane performs with his partner and another local act of talented musicians who also have music in the game. The mood is celebratory.

Afterward, much of the team and musicians converge at a local outdoor bar. It's late and dark, but there's no hesitation as the musicians pull out their guitars and mandolins and start an impromptu jam session. They're delighted when they learn I know some English songs they recognize, and I find myself in the surreal circumstance of singing lead on some Beatles tunes as the talented professionals back me up and play along.

As the evening wears on and the music and drinks make everything a bit hazy, my mind shifts back to the memory of the girls at the cultural hall, clustered together, fascinated by the video game lead that looks like them on the big screen. It's an enduring image that sticks with me on the long flight home over subsequent days. There's something special about this little game from a little studio about a little girl on a big adventure. It has something to do with what those kids saw on that screen and how they recognized something real in the fantasy. It also has something to do with a developer creating their own fantasy by looking back to their childhood and finding something equally real to add to the mix. ■

Visit GameInformer.com to see more of Tchia in action, as well as video footage of Awaceb's time in New Caledonia

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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

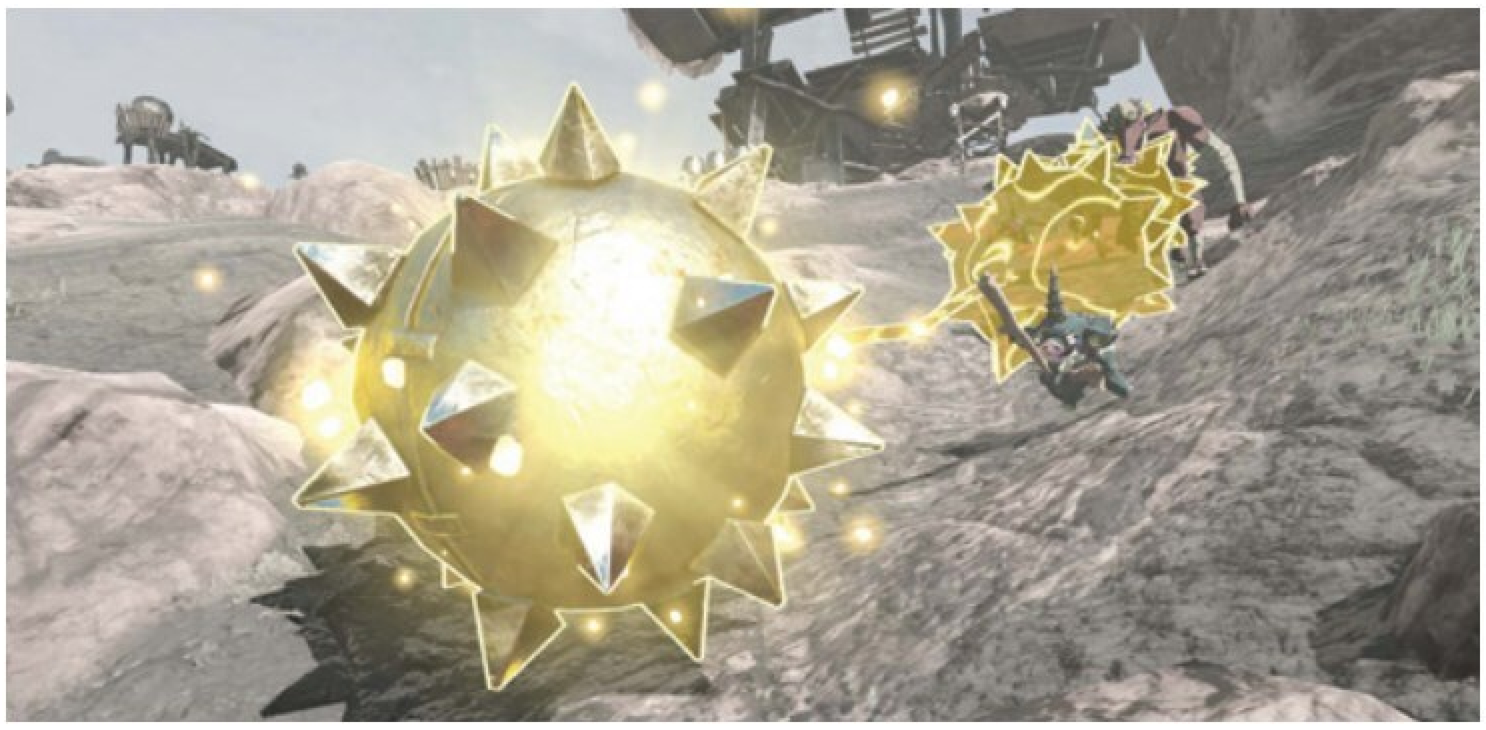
A new take on a familiar Hyrule

Since its announcement at E3 2019, we've been waiting for the veil to lift on the sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, itching to dive back into that beautiful rendition of Hyrule. Thanks to a recent trailer, we not only know when we'll finally be doing that but also the sequel's official title.

While The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom sounds innocuous enough and even holds a certain poetic symmetry with "Breath of the Wild," it may divulge more about the story. In 2021, Nintendo's vice president of product and player experience Bill Trinen told *IGN* the company was playing its cards close to the vest to avoid giving hints about where the story might go. While the subtitle "Tears of the Kingdom" doesn't immediately bring anything to mind, diving into the imagery and visual cues we've seen since the very first tease offers up some potential clues about the trajectory of Link and Zelda's next adventure.

In the 2019 reveal trailer, we witnessed the duo exploring a cavern with ancient events painted and chiseled into the walls. Malice – the same corrupting force that enabled Ganon to conquer Hyrule before Breath of the Wild – pours out from under a dried-out corpse seemingly held in place by a magical spell. As the duo arrives at the corpse, it appears the body belongs to the evil Gerudo king himself, Ganondorf. At the end of the trailer, we see the body reanimate and come back to life, and Hyrule Castle lifts into the sky, but the details are dicey at best.

In the next trailer, which arrived two years later at E3 2021, we received a clearer picture of how those events unfolded. As the Malice rapidly spreads through the cavern and the body springs back to life, it knocks the footing out from under Link and Zelda, and the princess of Hyrule plummets into a pit. The Malice consumes Link's right arm (and appears damaged in subsequent shots), but he's spared the fall Zelda endured by the same hand that once held Ganondorf's corpse in place. The trailer then leaps ahead to show Link skydiving, arms outstretched, much like in 2011's Skyward Sword.



As the direct sequel to Breath of the Wild, Tears of the Kingdom is presumably the latest entry in the official Zelda timeline, but it also features many fleshed-out ideas from Skyward Sword, the earliest game in that same timeline. Most notably, the ability to go from the surface of Hyrule up to new, floating land masses in the sky.

Unlike Skyward Sword, Tears of the Kingdom appears to have much more flexibility regarding how you can move from surface to sky. In the trailers we've seen so far, Link can not only climb as he does in Breath of the Wild but also soar upwards using a green spell of sorts. Another key mechanic of Tears of the Kingdom, both in battle and exploration, appears to be rewinding time. In one piece of footage, Link rewinds time along a mountainous path to redirect a spiked metal ball back at some Bokoblins. A more recent clip shows him rewinding time to ascend from Hyrule's surface to one of the many suspended islands above the kingdom, using rocks that seemingly fell from those pieces of land.

While in the sky, Tears of the Kingdom seems to offer players interiors to explore and new enemies to encounter. We don't yet know if these will arrive in the form of the full-fledged dungeons many sought after in Breath of the Wild, or simply more Shrine-esque mini-experiences. But it sure looks like the airborne experience could be quite substantial – perhaps even more substantial than what we received in Skyward Sword. The real mystery lies in what is new on the actual Hyrule surface; the Shrines and Towers that littered the map in Breath of the Wild appear gone, and some footage indicates we could have caves to explore.

There are other ways Skyward Sword's themes might intersect with those of Tears of the Kingdom – such as how the Master Sword is broken in the trailers for this new game, whereas a part of Skyward Sword's story revolves around the creation of the Master Sword – but we'll need to wait until the game's release to see how much crossover there is. Thankfully, along with the official name, Nintendo gave us a release date of May 12, 2023. We don't have much longer to wait before diving back into Hyrule to uncover a new set of mysteries en route to forging a new legend in the illustrious series.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo
RELEASE May 12

RISE OF THE RONIN

Ushering a new dawn

Not content with only launching Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty (p. 69) early next year, Team Ninja has another action game in the works called Rise of the Ronin. This PlayStation 5 console exclusive won't release until 2024, but our first look at this historical epic has already seized our attention.

Rise of the Ronin unfolds in 1863 Japan during the final years of the three-centuries-long Edo period. This tumultuous transition period, known as Bakumatsu, saw the nation overthrow its long-standing militaristic government and adopt the modernized empire of today due to civil unrest and increasing western influences. Players explore this chaotic era as a nameless ronin (a samurai without a master). While the story is steeped in history, Team Ninja has not revealed specific plot details yet.

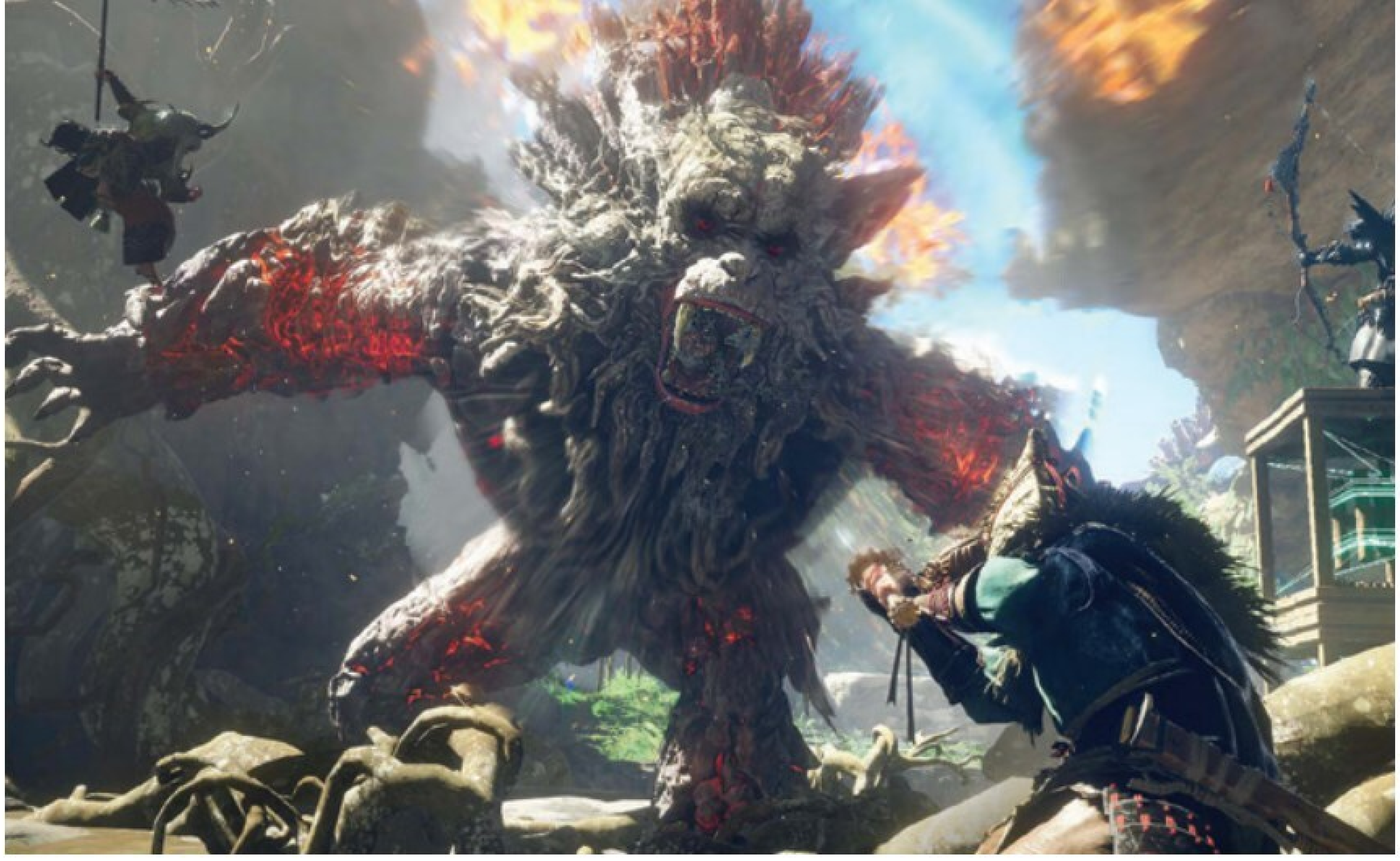
As an action game, Rise of the Ronin features fast-paced swordplay, which is no surprise given the studio's previous work on the Nioh series. Sword parries set up wild counterattacks, such as launching foes airborne and slamming them with a mid-air throw. You can even ignite your katana to dish out flame-licked punishment. The Ronin can use a rifle for long-ranged combat or impale foes using the bayonet at the tip. You can also use smaller arms, such as a revolver.

The game appears to be set in an open world. Team Ninja showed off a sprawling city, and players can travel across the picturesque landscapes on horseback. The Ronin can even deploy a bird-like glider to soar through the skies after leaping from high perches.

Team Ninja describes Rise of the Ronin as its most ambitious and challenging project yet. The team is harnessing years of expertise in the action department while also crafting a world comparable to Sony's Ghost of Tsushima. Moreover, Team Ninja wants to tackle this historical period in a manner that does justice while crafting a compelling story and characters. We won't see the fruits of this labor for some time, but this first taste has us salivating for more.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Koei Tecmo
DEVELOPER Team Ninja **RELEASE** 2024



WILD HEARTS

More than another Monster Hunter

In Wild Hearts, you play as a hunter tasked with defending the land of Azuma from the Kemono – once-peaceful beasts that have become chaotic monsters. While the game takes clear inspiration from Capcom's Monster Hunter series, it does plenty to set itself apart. With explorable open-world areas, seamless three-player online co-op, and a fast-paced, magical crafting system, Wild Hearts is shaping up to be as massive as the monsters you'll be fighting.

Gameplay takes place across four hunting grounds: open-world areas themed after one of the four seasons. As you explore, you hunt Kemono of all shapes and sizes. While monsters in other hunting games often draw on creatures from mythology or other works of fiction, Kemono largely appear to be based on real animals with an added elemental twist. For example, Deathstalker is an icy wolf, Kingtusk is a boar overgrown with vines, and Lavaback is a giant, fiery ape. Battles can be long and perilous, but you don't have to face them alone. Up to two friends can drop in and out of your world at any moment, even during battle. No matter what platform you're on, Wild Hearts will support cross-play between PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC.

The primary system setting Wild Hearts apart from similar games is the introduction of Karakuri technology: tools and traps the player can magically craft to get the upper hand in battle or traverse the open world. Hunters can create a whole range of devices: a zipline you can shoot across the map to cross wide gaps, a hover tool you can use to get the drop on a Kemono, or simple building blocks that can be stacked together to make more complex structures. Once it's been placed, any player can use Karakuri, regardless of who crafted it, and the tools stay in the world permanently – that is, unless a Kemono comes by and knocks it down. When it's time to fight, players combine their magical crafts with one of several weapons. So far, we've only seen two – a katana and some sort of battle parasol – but there will be eight options to choose from at launch, each with different combos and animations.

I'm excited about the different ways I can combine weapons with different Karakuri constructs and explore the distinct hunting grounds with a group of friends. Luckily, I won't have to wait long: Wild Hearts releases in early 2023. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Omega Force
RELEASE February 17

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POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

A battle between new and old

Going into my hands-on time with Pokémon Scarlet, I expected some changes based on Game Freak's embrace of open-world gameplay and a "do what you want when you want" mentality with its three primary story paths. Pokémon has yet to make the massive generational shift I've dreamed of for years and has instead opted for half-steps with each new entry. Scarlet isn't that transformational change but is significantly more than a small iteration. In fact, it may be the series' biggest to date.

I explored a small portion of the Scarlet map for an hour and was surprised by the amount of available ground to cover. Three objective markers appear across a valley and desert area, each representing one of the three main story paths: the Victory Road, the standard, eight-gym storyline seen throughout the series; the Path of Legends, which consists of tracking down Titan Pokémon; and Starfall Street, a unique take on the Team Rocket-esque plotline found in every mainline entry. I set off toward the Path of Legends marker and did so atop Koraidon, the legendary Pokémon adorning the Scarlet box.

It's immediately clear how much Pokémon Legends: Arceus informs this generation of Pokémon because, like Arceus' various helpful Pokémon, Koraidon can glide through the air, swim across lakes and oceans, and climb up cliffs. You can also ride Koraidon anywhere. Everything feels faster as a result, including the seamlessness of the open world.

While roaming the area, I see an aggressive Lechonk holding his ground, threatening a battle if I get closer. I capture a special Shinx that glistens from a distance, indicating it has a rare Tera-type. I see a small horde of Shinx elsewhere and Magikarp swimming in the ocean.

Taking inspiration from Arceus, Scarlet's world feels alive thanks to these wild Pokémon. Battling is the most surprising aspect of this entire preview. Instead of seeing the typical screen-break transition, the battle simply starts. You move the camera freely, giving a cinematic freedom I've never felt in Pokémon before. When the battle is over, I'm back to riding atop Koraidon, again with no screen break or transition.

Furthering my sense of control and freedom is a mechanic oddly named "Let's Go." Here, you press R to send out the Pokémon first in your party to retrieve an item or battle a Pokémon. It's completely autonomous; your Pokémon is sent out and does its own thing.

Upon reaching the Titan questline marker, I encounter a massive Klawf. Nintendo tells me these Titan encounters contain three steps: track them down, battle against them, and a third step I could not pursue based on preview parameters. This is fun, but I can see them growing stale after some time, especially if each encounter consists of the same three steps. Nintendo gave me an overpowered team, too, so I don't have a proper grasp on the challenge of Scarlet, unfortunately.

I then go to a nearby Team Star base, one of many, to try out the Starfall Street path. Here, Nintendo tells me to put the three Pokémon I want to fight with at the top of my party. Once inside, a timer appears, and I have 10 minutes to defeat 30 Team Star Pokémon. I must complete this challenge using the Let's Go mechanic. It's easy, likely due to my overpowered team, and I hope the final game presents more of a challenge.

To round out my time with the Scarlet, I attempt to complete a gym for the Victory Road path. I do what you've likely seen in trailers – discover 10 Sunflora around town – but I don't have time to complete my standard battle with Brassius afterward.

I left my Pokémon Scarlet preview excited about the ninth generation of a series I've had with me almost my entire life. Sword and Shield left me wanting a lot more, especially as the first big mainline entry on Switch. Scarlet and Violet aren't flipping the formula on its head, but there are enough changes that I'd call this the biggest generational transformation in years. The open-world aspects of these games are refreshing, adding more personality and seamlessness to the series than ever before. The ability to tackle the three primary story paths at any time seems fun, too, but I wasn't able to test its limits – something I look forward to doing in the final game.

Nonetheless, the improved visuals and boundless design of Scarlet's world has me excited to experience this Paldean journey, even if I'm left wanting more in other aspects.
BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Game Freak **RELEASE** November 18

LIKE A DRAGON: ISHIN

Rewriting history

In 2017, Yakuza 0 catapulted the series' western popularity and visibility to new heights. The well-received title took the long-running franchise from cult favorite to global mainstream success, and subsequent entries and spin-offs like Judgment have further raised developer Ryu Ga Gatoku's global profile. This new demand, and the popularity of historical games like Ghost of Tsushima, inspired RGG to dip into its portfolio and remake its Japan-exclusive spin-off, Like A Dragon: Ishin, for a wider audience.

Like A Dragon: Ishin first launched in 2014 in Japan for the PS3 and as a PS4 launch title. The game is a historical action epic set during the 1860s, the waning years of the samurai era, and features real-life figures portrayed by familiar Yakuza characters. Ishin is the second game in its series; the first title, Ryū ga Gotoku: Kenzan, was released in 2008 and never launched abroad either, though the games are set 200 years apart and have no narrative connection.

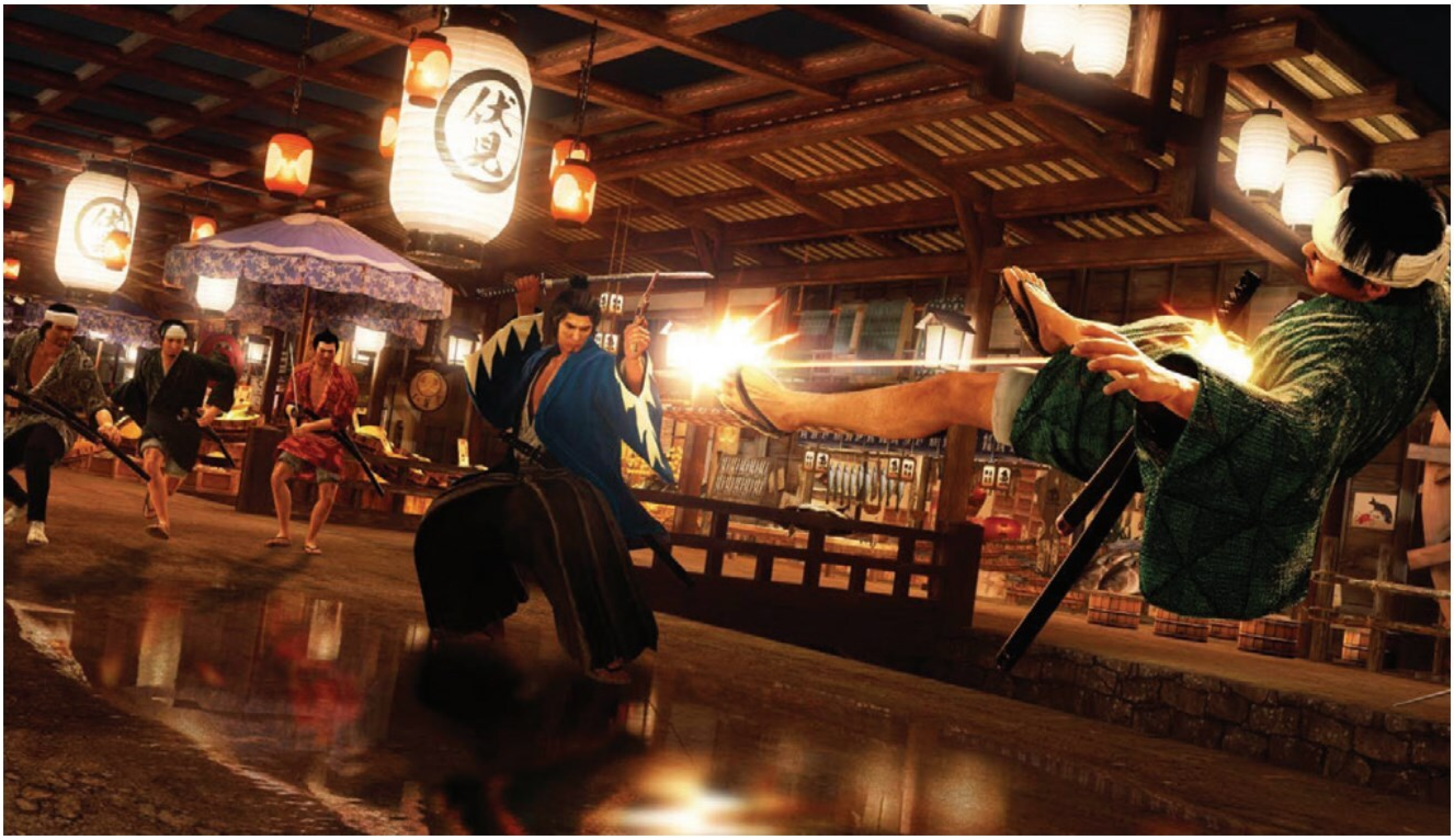
Ishin stars Sakamoto Ryōma, a real-life samurai during the end of Japan's Edo period. The plot centers on Ryōma's search for his father's killer in Kyoto, and this mission spirals into a grander struggle against nationwide inequality that shapes the course of Japanese history. Speaking to the head of RGG Studio, Masayoshi Yokoyama, Ishin ranks "one or two" on the list of his favorite games in terms of storytelling.

"Ishin is very embedded in Japanese history," says Yokoyama. "And in Japan, there are tons of really huge, huge history fans. Especially when it comes to people like Sakamoto Ryōma or [the] Shinsengumi, they're super, super popular in Japan ... delivering it in a realistic way that history fans wouldn't just approve of but would actually like was a massive effort. And I think because of that, it's why it would probably be my favorite."

Kazama Kiryu "plays" Ryōma in the same way a real-life actor lends their likeness and voice to a role. Expect to see many Yakuza favorites, such as Goro Majima, appear as other historical figures. RGG has even added characters from titles that have launched since Ishin's original release. For example, Yakuza: Like A Dragon's Ichiban Kasuga and Masato Arakawa have roles.

The action and world design feel like that of classic Yakuza. In a demo during Tokyo Game Show, I explore a village set during the evening. Tasked with reaching a rendezvous point, I keep a low profile as I quietly stroll the dirt roads, peeking down alleyways between shops in search of my informant. In true Yakuza fashion, a gang of street thugs suddenly jumps me, forcing me to defend myself.

Combat features four styles: Sword, Gun, Dance, and Brawl. Ryōma can slice through foes using his katana but also brandishes a revolver to keep distant targets at bay. At one point, I unleash a spinning attack where Ryōma fires bullets in all directions, riddling everyone around me with lead. You can trigger environmental attacks depending on your positioning, such as knocking foes over the edge of a bridge. Though it has a different coat of paint, the core of combat feels largely the same as Yakuza. Ishin's big feature is the ability to unleash special abilities by summoning the power of soldiers.

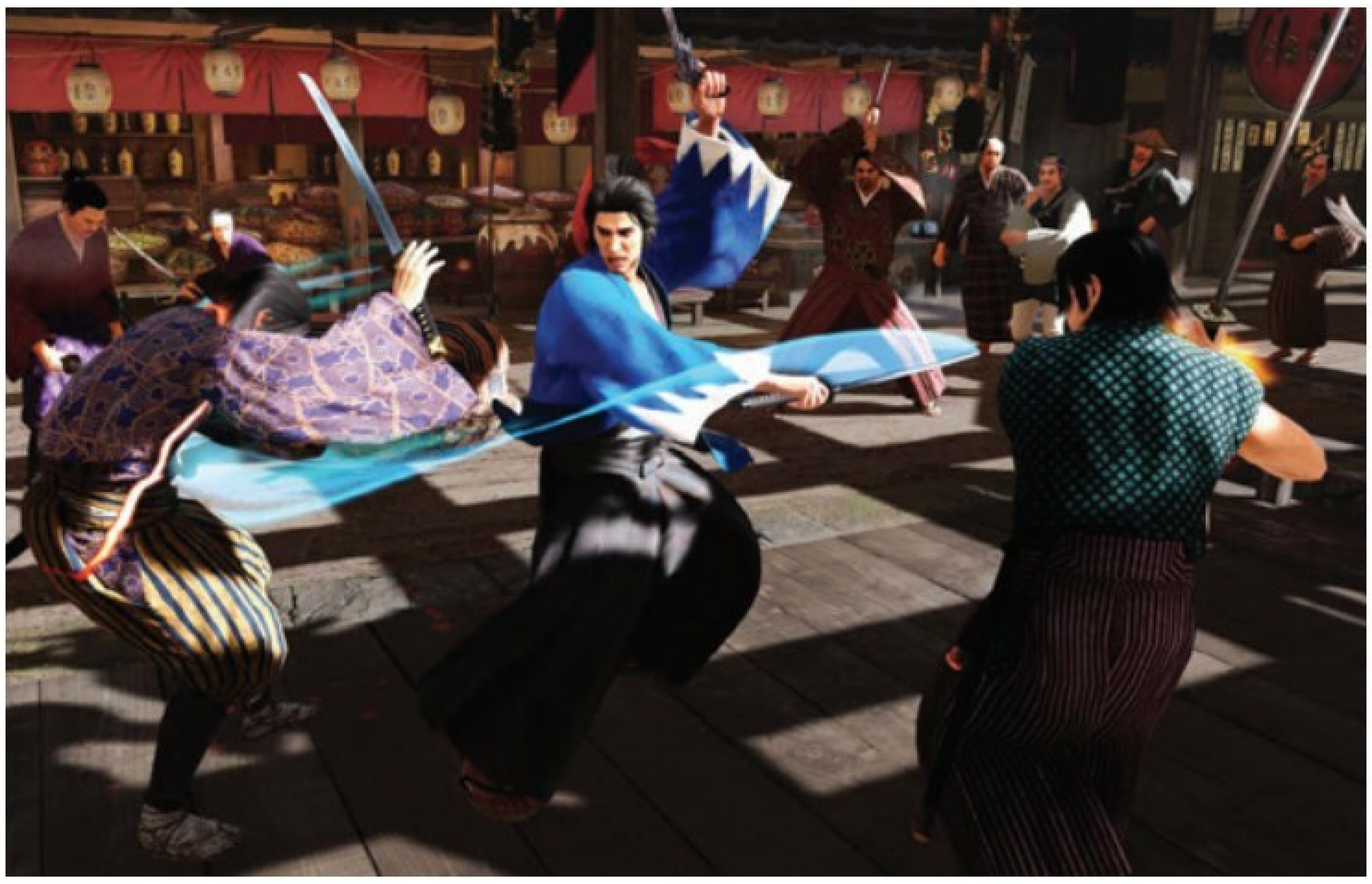


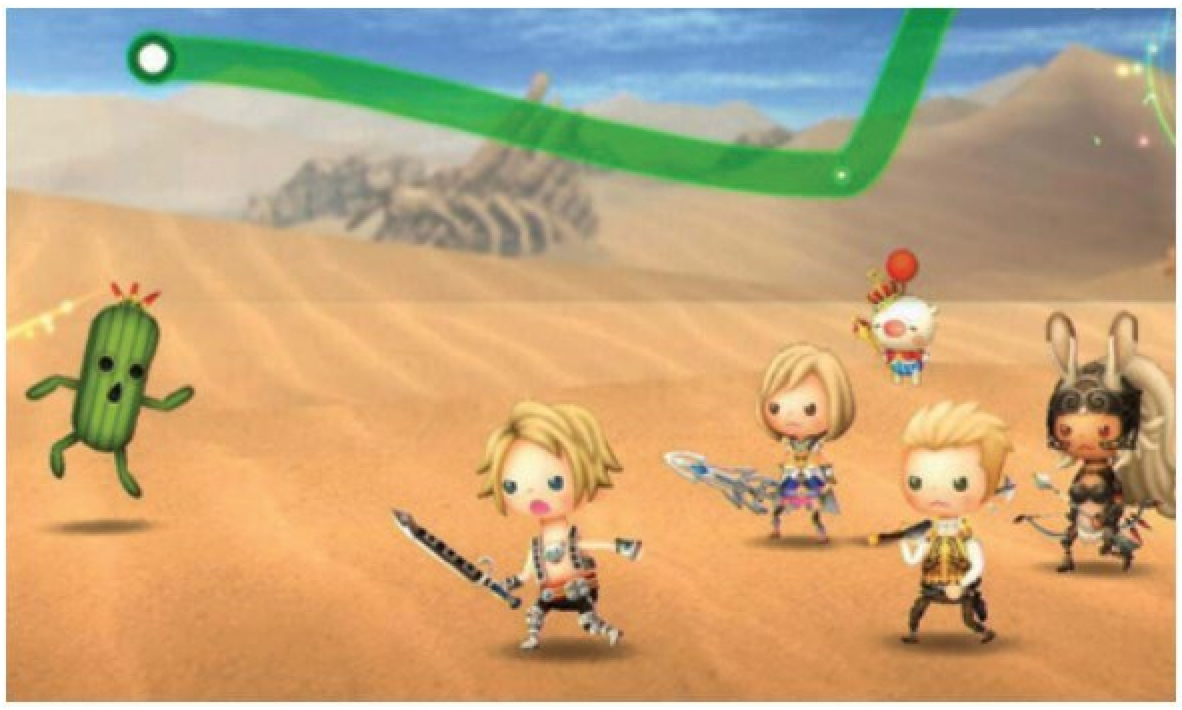
These troops represent a recognizable character, and Ryōma has four mapped on the d-pad. Calling upon Ichiban, for example, raises Ryoma's strength, letting him deal more damage. Another power boosts the effectiveness of my other soldiers' gifts. My favorite slows time to a crawl, letting me dish out tons of damage to helpless targets. You can even unleash an energy blast that rivals Goku's Kamehameha from *Dragon Ball*, showing Ishin can be just as silly as traditional Yakuza.

Boss fights may prove challenging if my encounter with a skilled and intimidating swordsman is any indication. This duel pushes my nascent skills to their limits, and I realize that hacking away wildly is getting me nowhere. Instead, I am encouraged to play it like a real sword fight. I patiently circle my opponent waiting for openings, dodge incoming swipes to land a hit or two, and parry attacks to create windows to retaliate. This battle also teaches me how to skillfully use my soldier abilities since they operate on a cooldown. Instead of spamming them haphazardly, I pick my spots and call up their aid at more optimal moments.

Like A Dragon: Ishin sports improved graphical presentation and additional content, meaning fans who played the original won't be getting the same game again. I'm impressed with what I've played so far, and I'm glad the series is popular enough to justify localizing this intriguing spin-off. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Ryu Ga Gatoku Studio **RELEASE** February 21





THEATRHYTHM FINAL BAR LINE

Lining up the right notes

Final Fantasy's take on the rhythm genre is back with Theatrhythm Final Bar Line, releasing this February on PlayStation 4 and Switch.

The first Theatrhythm released in 2014 on the Nintendo 3DS, and since then there have been plenty of new Final Fantasy songs to add to the series, including tracks from Final Fantasy XV, Final Fantasy XIV, and Final Fantasy VII Remake, all of which make appearances in Final Bar Line. For the uninitiated, Theatrhythm was a unique take on the rhythm genre that required stylus swipes and taps on the 3DS's touchscreen, making it more involved than similar titles that require just button presses.

With the series moving to PlayStation 4 and Switch, touchscreen-based gameplay is gone. Instead, Final Bar Line requires specific button presses, analog stick inputs, and more. If this rhythm gameplay is as satisfying as previous entries, fans are in for a treat because Final Bar Line features 385 songs at launch, with specific editions including another 27 songs to play through. DLC will bring even more tracks from other Square Enix series like Nier, Octopath Traveler, The World Ends With You, and more.

These songs will play in Battle Music, Field Music, and Event Music stages, each of which take you through memorable moments throughout the associated series with an adorable chibi art style. Various modes, like Endless World, Multi Battle, and the new Series Quests mode will give players more options to experience these songs, too.

If one of your favorite parts of the Final Fantasy series is its music, Theatrhythm Final Bar Line is a game you'll want to keep your eye on. Even if you're not familiar with the series, this might convince you to check out the famed franchise.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS4 • Switch
STYLE 2-Player Rhythm/Music (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Indieszero **RELEASE** February 16

LIKE A DRAGON 8

The changing face of Yakuza

Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio capped off its recent RGG summit with the next game in the Yakuza series. But there's a twist. To more closely align with its Japanese name – and reflect the declining prevalence of the Yakuza both in the fiction and the real world – the latest game is now called Like A Dragon 8.

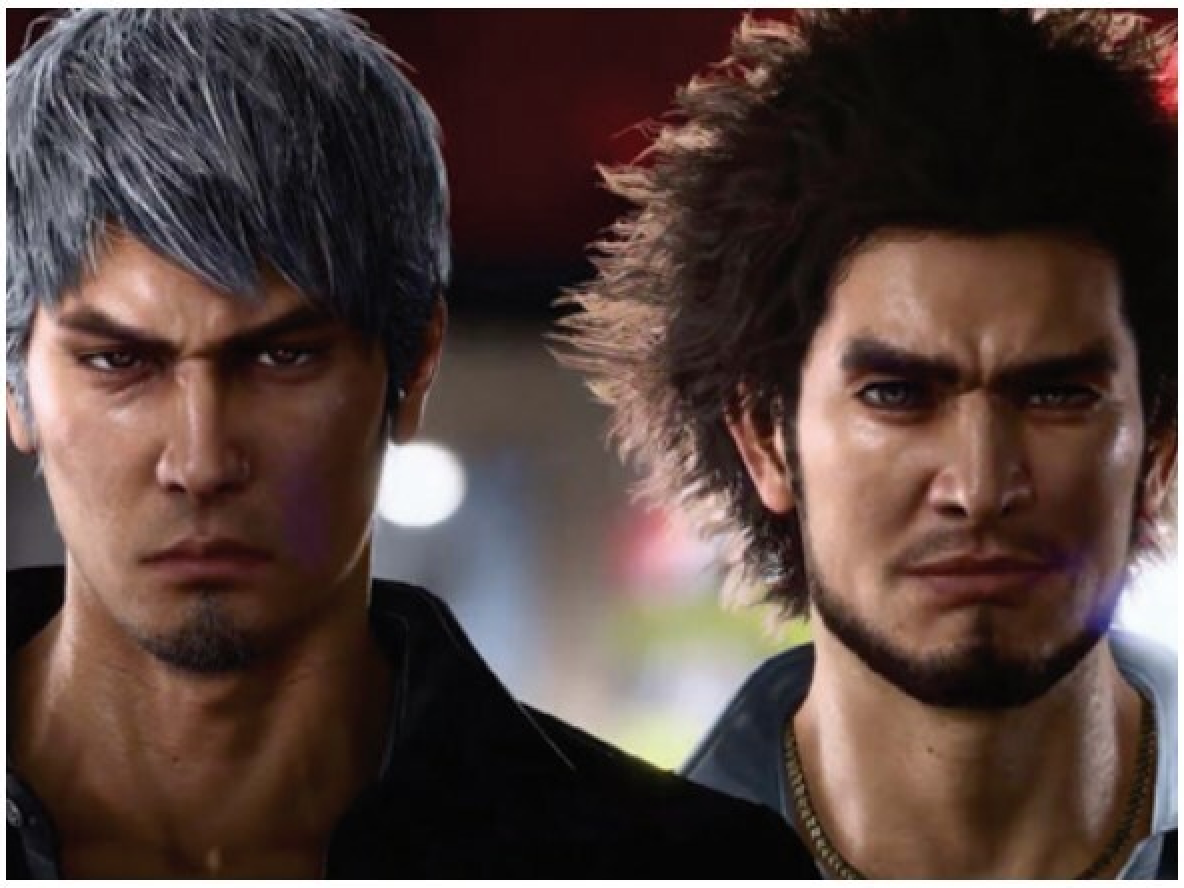
Protagonist Ichiban Kasuga is back, as is series mainstay Kiryu Kazuma – with one of the most baffling hair choices we've seen in years. Personally, I hate it. But without any other options, I'll give it the benefit of the doubt for now.

Details are pretty scarce, but we know that it's retaining Yakuza 7's turn-based combat, and it's set years after the previous game's events. In an interview with *Dengeki Online* (translation via Carrie Williams), RGG studio head Masayoshi Yokoyama did give the slightest amount of story details.

"It's not about the past characters, but rather about the 'business,'" Yokoyama told the outlet. "The yakuza world and its necessary evils. They were all part of that world, and it contained all kinds of good and evil, didn't it? That's what the [Yakuza] series has been about all this time. In [Yakuza] 7, we showed you how the underworld lost its power, with the decline of Tojo Kai and the dissolution of the yakuza. As [Like A Dragon] 8 is the sequel to [Yakuza] 7, it will continue that story, and show you how the underworld moves on and cleans itself up."

Like A Dragon 8 isn't out until 2024. But RGG Studio had plenty of other announcements to keep you busy. Like A Dragon: Ishin (p. 66), a remake of the once Japan-only spin-off, is set to be released early next year. There's also Like A Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name, a bridge between Yakuza 6 and Like A Dragon 8, and the events of Kiryu therein, set to be released sometime next year as well.

BY BLAKE HESTER



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **RELEASE** 2024

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

Five phases of entertaining challenge

You'd be forgiven for mistaking Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty as a longer-titled Nioh 3. The two games share many similarities: fast-paced melee combat, steep difficulty, loot collecting, and plenty of supernatural abilities and adversaries. But where Nioh focused on Japanese swordplay, Wo Long centers on Chinese martial arts and history.

Wo Long occurs during the late Han dynasty in China's turbulent Three Kingdoms era. Players control a nameless militia soldier who battles demons terrorizing the lands.

Wo Long's martial arts design is based on the Five Phases philosophy. In Chinese culture, this tenet refers to the elements that form the world's natural balance: Fire, Water, Earth, Wood, and Metal.

You begin Wo Long by creating a customized warrior. After that, the game tasks you with choosing one of the five phases as your primary style. Fire emphasizes attack strength and combustion-based offense. Earth bolsters defense, letting you summon stone pillars to pelt at enemies. Wood is a support class with healing abilities. Metal offers various debuffs to impair foes. Lastly, Water focuses on stealth and ice attacks.

Although your starting phase forms the foundation of your character, leveling allows you to put points into any of them. This creates a flexible system where you can wield numerous abilities from each phase, which Wo Long encourages as some enemies are vulnerable to a particular Phase's offense. Combat itself should be familiar to Nioh fans; you utilize two melee and ranged weapons, along with several forms of blocking, parrying, and evasion. Hacking apart foes initially feels like an old song and dance, but Wo Long's morale system offers a dramatic shift in combat philosophy.

Morale appears as a number hovering over your hero as well as enemies. This rank affects your combat power; a meter fills as you defeat targets but partially depletes when you take damage. Filling the meter increases your Morale Rank by one point. Thus, the better you perform, the higher your Morale Rank, and the stronger you become. Enemies with a greater Morale Rank than you will be tougher to defeat but doing so can significantly increase your rank and drop significant rewards. Hitting my stride in Wo Long feels great due to the constant reward of growing more powerful. It also makes the already punishing defeats feel even more devastating; I hated taking hits and watching my Morale tick back down.

Dying in Wo Long causes you to lose Morale Points and your experience that must be recovered from the spot you fell. However, raising hidden battle flags increases your Fortitude Rank, increasing the baseline of your Morale. So, if your Fortitude is 5 and your Morale is 6, your Morale never falls below 5 when you perish.

Wizardry serves as Wo Long's take on performing magic. Each Phase brings its own brand of spellcasting. As a Water-based fighter, I unleashed elemental and stealth-based spells such as raining down a shower of frozen daggers, firing Sub-Zero-style ice balls, and turning temporarily invisible. Unleashing the aid of Divine Beasts levels the playing field in more spectacular ways. I enlisted a giant turtle sporting a mountain on its shell and a snake wrapped around it that used its frost breath to blast foes into oblivion.

With two Nioh games and years of action expertise, Team Ninja wants Wo Long to be its sharpest title yet. It also may be its darkest, as the studio wants to tell a bloodier take on Chinese fantasy and martial arts as opposed to the more whimsical, high-flying wuxia style many westerners associate with the premise. Action aficionados seemingly have plenty to look forward to when Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty arrives on March 3, 2023. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Koei Tecmo **DEVELOPER** Team Ninja **RELEASE** March 3

TEKKEN 8

Tekken 8's cinematic reveal trailer offered a jaw-dropping first look at the improved graphical fidelity of the next King of Iron Fist tournament. Featuring remodeled, realistic characters and dynamic background effects, Tekken 8 is a visual treat so far. Story-wise, the game focuses on the father-and-son feud between Kazuya and Jin. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1 or 2 Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER Bandai Namco **RELEASE** TBA

NEED FOR SPEED UNBOUND

Need For Speed Unbound is the return of street races and police chases, this time with a visual twist. Characters have a cel-shaded art style, and cars have customizable graffiti effects, animating dust clouds and tire tracks. With 143 cars to choose from and an emphasis on street art and fashion, Need For Speed puts style in the driver's seat. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

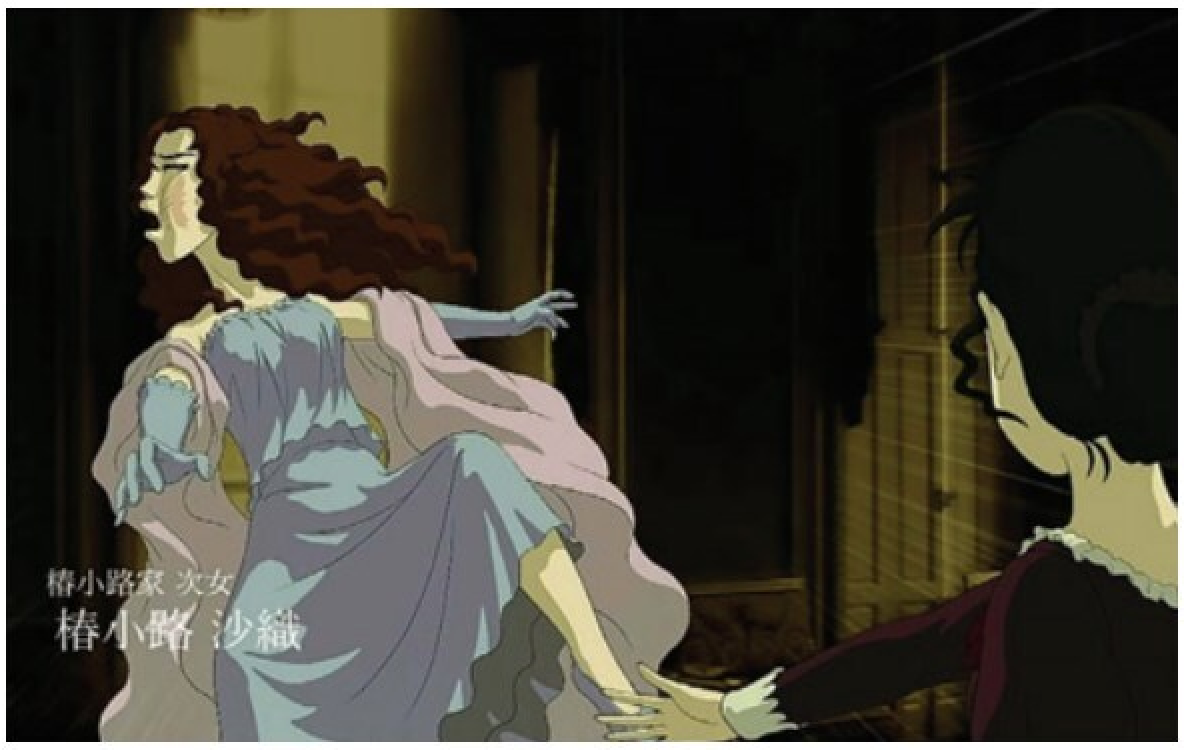
AWGE
ALWAYS STRIVE AND PROSPER

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Racing (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER Criterion Software **RELEASE** December 2

ROSE AND CAMELLIA

As the widow of a deceased noble, you must claim your inheritance by literally slapping your family members into submission. Rose and Camellia's humorous, Punch-Out style slap duels test your reflexes as you read enemy signs to dodge slaps, then retaliate with your own. Originally a Japanese Flash game and available on mobile, it now makes its way to Switch.

BY MARCUS STEWART


椿小路家 次女
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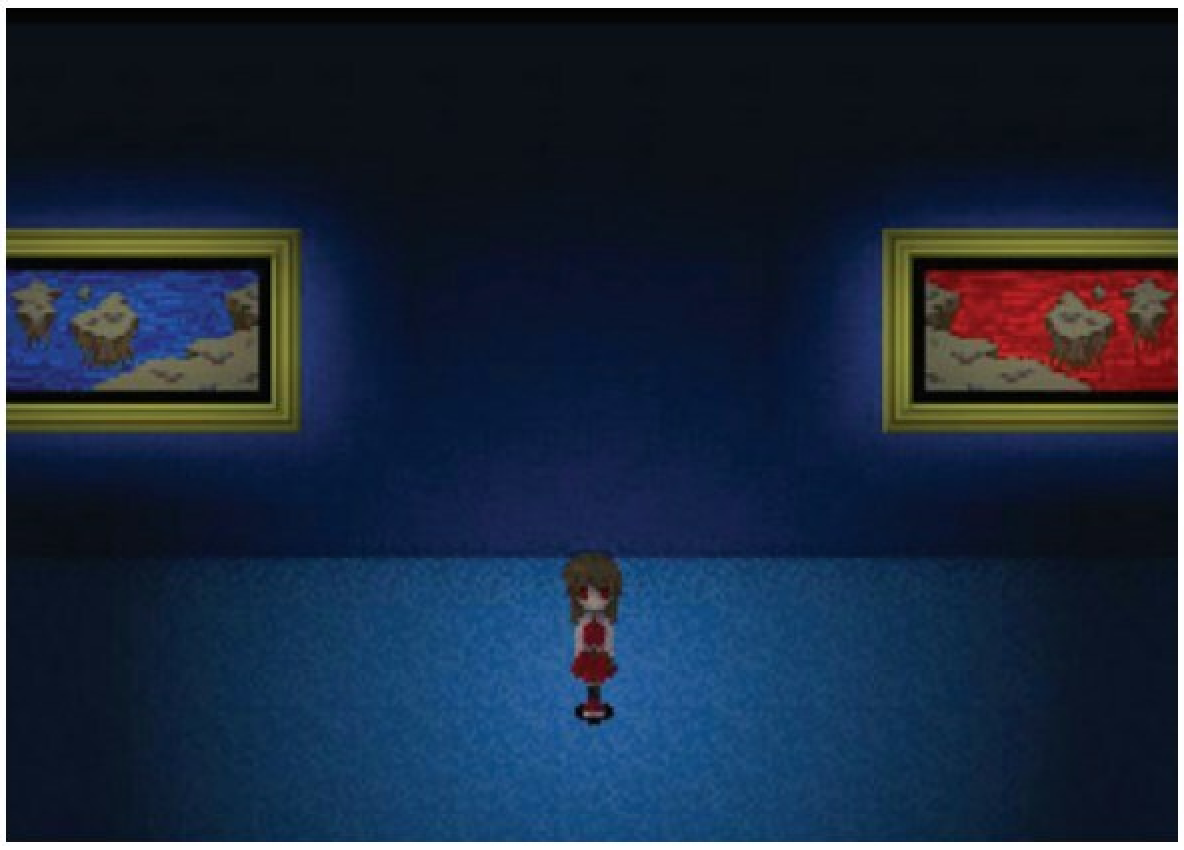
PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Action
PUBLISHER Playism **DEVELOPER** Nigoro **RELEASE** TBA



IB

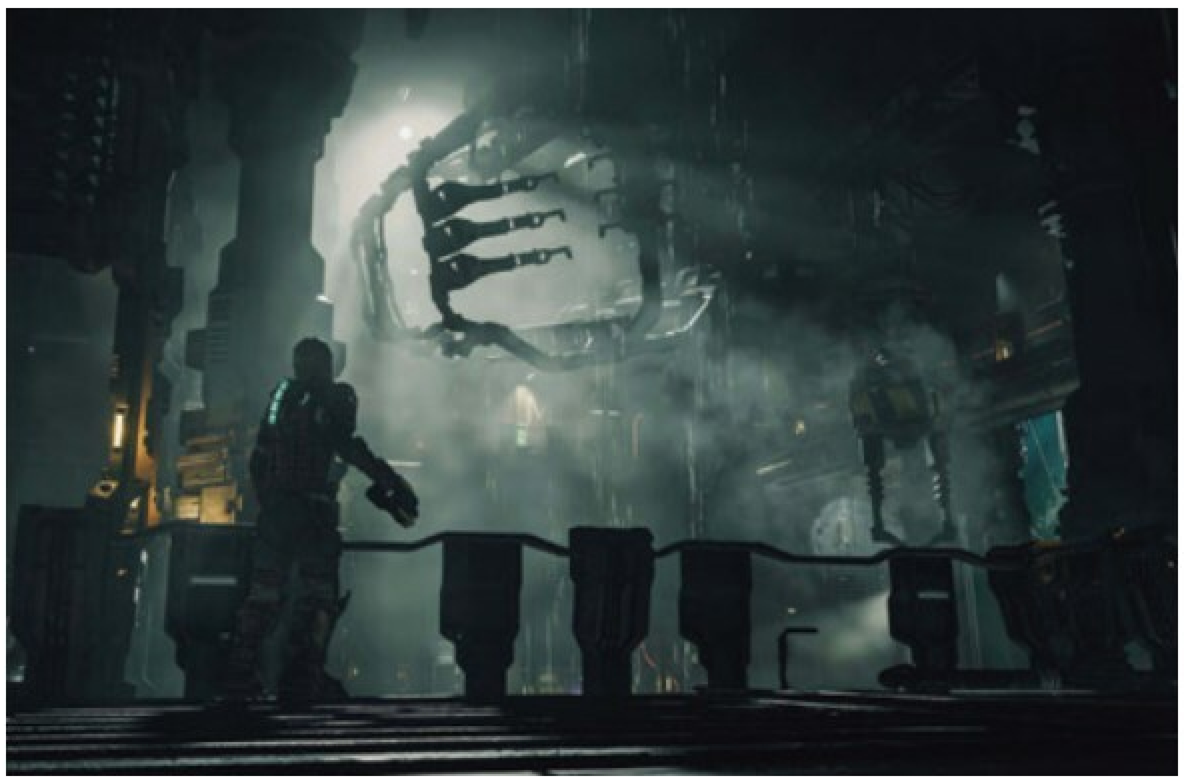
Ib is a fascinating and unsettling psychological horror game about exploring an art gallery where nothing is as it seems. Interacting with artwork leads to supernatural occurrences, creating unique environmental puzzles. First released in 2012 as freeware, the Switch version offers improved visuals, new puzzles, and quality-of-life updates. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Playism **DEVELOPER** kouri **RELEASE** 2023

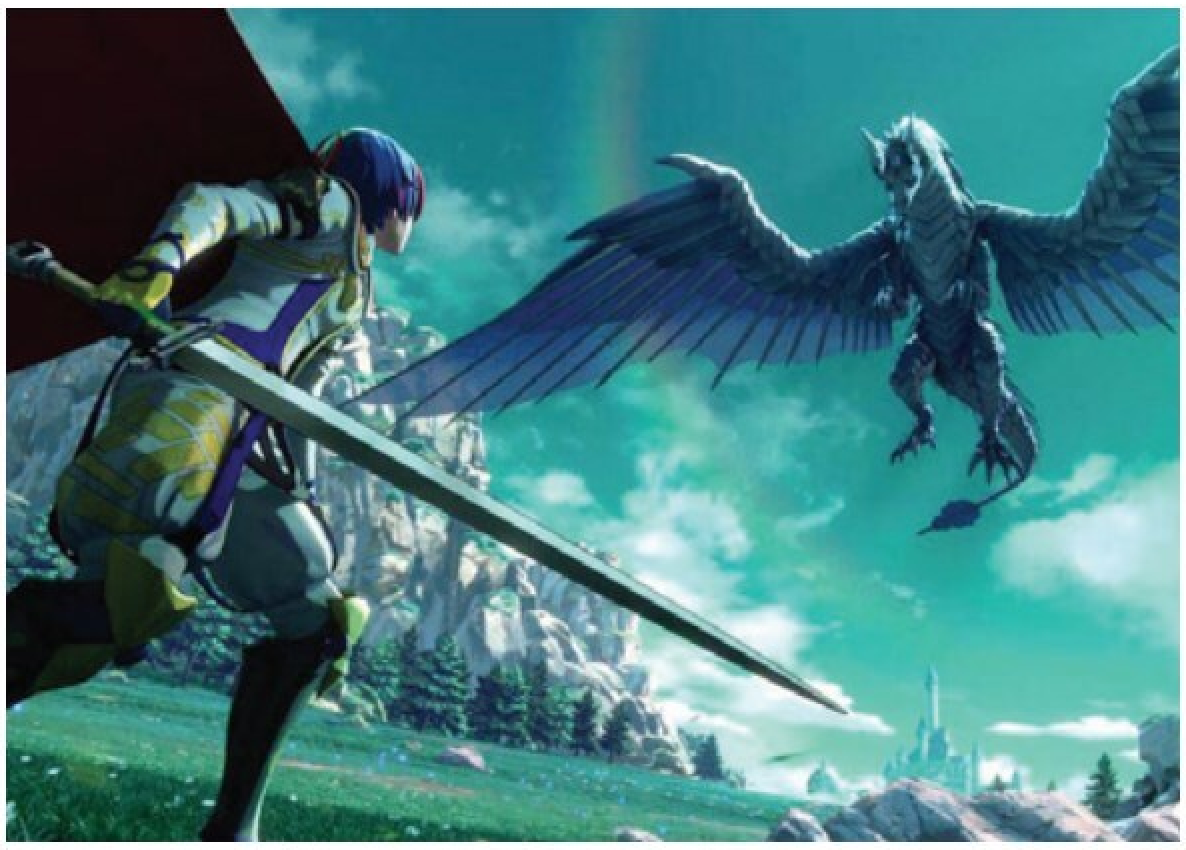
DEAD SPACE

Dead Space is back, and it certainly looks like Dead Space – which isn't a bad thing. But it sure is a gross thing. We recently got our first glimpse of gameplay, and the updated visuals look great. But it also means that every gory finisher and dismembered limb looks far nastier than it ever did in 2008. Try not to feel sick to your stomach when it comes out in January 2023.

BY BLAKE HESTER



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Motive **RELEASE** January 27

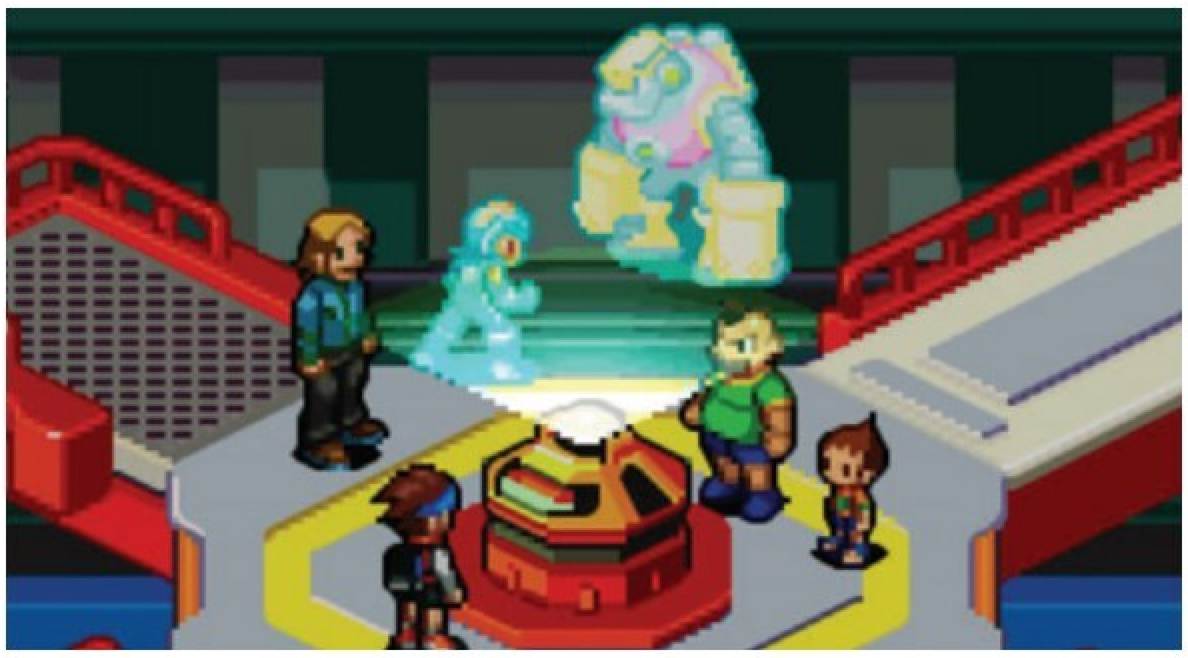


FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

Intelligent Systems is back with Fire Emblem Engage, a new turn-based tactical RPG coming to Switch in a few months. This time, the studio brings some fan-favorite characters back into the mix, like Marth and Lucina. They'll fight alongside a new red and blue-haired hero known as the Divine Dragon to help seal away the ancient Fell Dragon. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Intelligent Systems **RELEASE** January 20

MEGA MAN BATTLE NETWORK LEGACY COLLECTION



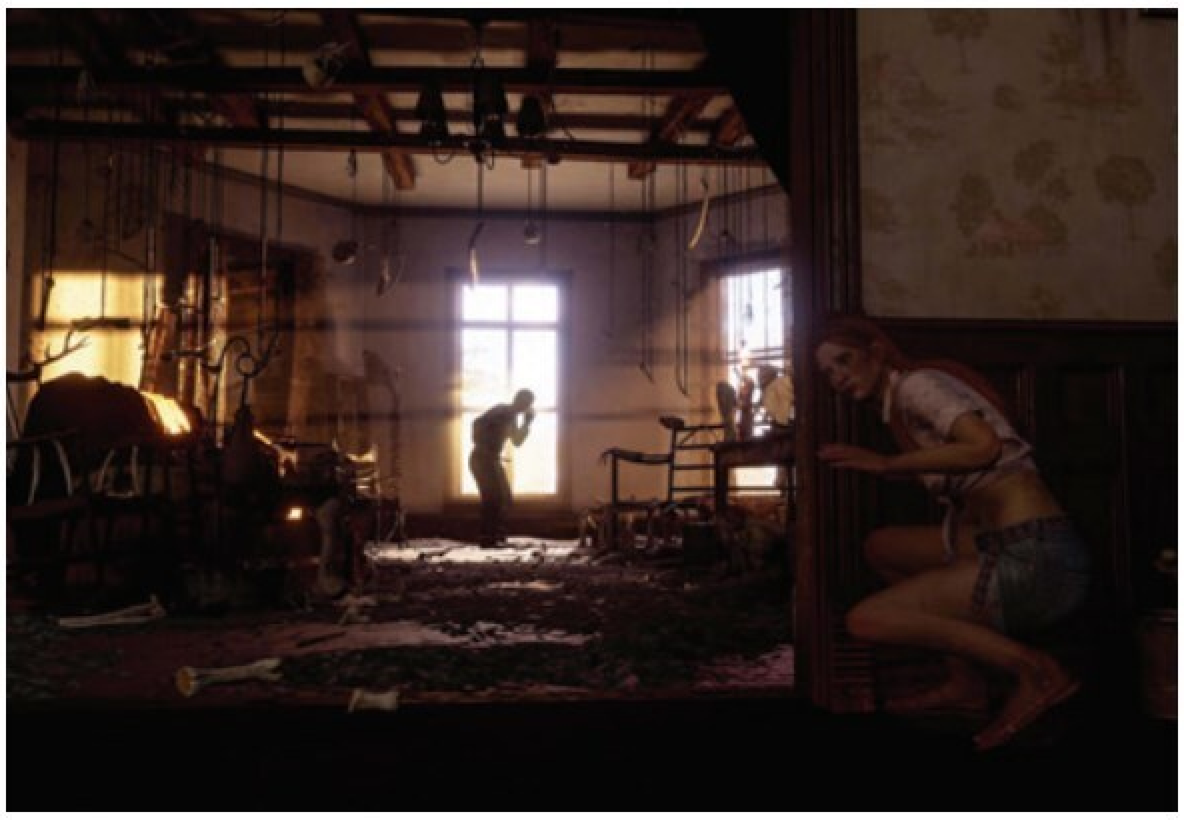
Mega Man, Lan, and the gang are back in this remastered bundle of 10 games divided between the first six Battle Network titles. Besides giving fans a modern method of enjoying these Game Boy Advance gems, Legacy Collection packs in artwork, a music player, and a high-res filter. A 3D avatar of Mega Man himself even guides menu selection for a nice touch.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom
RELEASE 2023

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

From the minds behind Friday the 13th: The Game comes The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, a new 7-player asymmetrical multiplayer game based on the movie franchise of the same name. Four survivors will face off against three killers, including horror icon Leatherface, to escape a dreadful location, using special abilities and unique playstyles to survive. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC** ■



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 7-Player Online Action **PUBLISHER** Gun Interactive
DEVELOPER Sumo Digital **RELEASE** 2023

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GI MUST PLAY

OVERWATCH 2

A heroic return

Overwatch took the gaming world by storm when it launched in 2016, thanks to its well-balanced roster of unique heroes and terrific objective-based, first-person-shooting gameplay. The game's popularity endured through the years due to a wealth of new content like characters, maps, cosmetics, and game modes, adding to the terrific foundation. However, once the content dried up, the public interest followed shortly afterward. Overwatch 2 represents the re-emergence of one of the top multiplayer games of the last generation, delivering a 5v5 format, a free-to-play structure, and a ton of new content. The result is an action-packed and enjoyable progression of the beloved hero-shooter franchise, but one that feels less revolutionary and more iterative than expected.

The core gameplay is simultaneously familiar and fresh. Capturing an objective with a coordinated assault or activating your Ultimate during a crucial last-second push to secure the victory is just as exciting as ever. The ways the heroes interact with each other – both in gameplay and personality – create watercooler moments I imagine I'll bring up with my fellow players for years to come. The mechanics and match flow remain mostly intact, but developer Blizzard implemented various changes to the core formula to deliver something that changes how battles play out.

The new 5v5 format is perhaps the most significant change in Overwatch. Now, traditional team comps drop to one tank, making its role as a damage sponge and utility player more critical than ever. With Doomfist now a tank and Orisa reworked to be more offense-minded, you now have a broader range to choose from in the category. Outside of tank play, this 5v5 format opens the door for faster-paced blitzes and ensures that every player carries more importance in each match. This shift is particularly evident in Push, the new game mode where players escort a robot to the other team's spawn point. This mode is fast-paced and can swing the other way quickly, playing perfectly into the new 5v5 format.

When you first jump into Overwatch 2, you can expect a ton of new content right out of the gate: three heroes, six maps, a game mode, and more than 30 skins. The new heroes and maps are stellar additions to the preexisting lineups; Junker Queen and Sojourn are formidable in battle, but Kiriko, with her substantial healing and buffing capabilities and deadly kunai attack, is one of my favorite support heroes to date. When you combine these new characters with the reworks of longtime favorites like Orisa, Doomfist, Zarya, and Bastion, the roster feels refreshed, and the meta flipped on its head.

Whenever a formerly premium title becomes free-to-play, players are rightfully wary, thanks to predatory monetization schemes that permeate the category. While players should still approach Overwatch 2's shift to free-to-play with caution, Blizzard keeps the paywall-locked content cosmetic. The best part is that players no longer must cross their fingers for anything but duplicate cosmetics in their loot boxes.

Now, loot boxes are replaced by an in-game shop and Battle Pass, which progresses by completing in-game challenges. Progress accumulates steadily regardless of if you pay the $10 (or the equivalent of in-game coins) for the boosted premium Battle Pass. However, it's disappointing that you need to reach level 55 of the free Battle Pass to unlock that season's new hero; if you purchase premium, the hero joins your roster at level 1. The rest of the rewards are cosmetic, but with so many exclusive to the premium pass, non-paying players may find limited satisfaction from this new structure. And with seasons lasting nine weeks, those who buy each premium Battle Pass at $10 will eclipse the $60 MSRP of the original Overwatch in just over a year.

While I'm certainly wary of this new system going forward, for now, the structure seems like a reasonable alternative to the previous framework. Thanks to a sneak peek of the content on the horizon, Blizzard has impressive plans for its resurgent hero shooter, and I like the existing challenge system. However, I most appreciate the intentionality in unlocking rewards, which starkly contrasts Overwatch 1's loot box system.

Those who never played the first Overwatch have additional hurdles, like needing to unlock the original heroes by playing a set number of matches. Blizzard bills this as a way to fend off cheaters since it's now free to start a new account. But it ultimately feels like punishment for not paying the price for the first game. The silver lining is that this drip-feed approach could onboard new players without overwhelming them with many characters to learn.

Overwatch 2 doesn't flip the formula the way you might expect a long-awaited, numbered sequel would. But through various clever tweaks, it's a well-rounded evolution I've poured more than a thousand hours into since 2016. I may never recreate the magic of those first few years in Overwatch, but Overwatch 2 is a big step towards restoring the faith in the franchise and has me thinking it's time to pour a few more hundred hours into my favorite team-based shooter.

BY BRIAN SHEA

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 10-Player Online Shooter **PUBLISHER** Blizzard Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Activision Blizzard **RELEASE** October 4 **RATING** T

BAYONETTA 3

For extravagance's sake

The Bayonetta series has always been at its best when you're staring slack-jawed at your TV, repeatedly muttering, "What the hell is happening?" The series is excessive by nature. Bayonetta 3 is no different. From its opening seconds, you're thrown into large-scale fights necessitating you juggle numerous enemies at once while switching weapons, summoning giant monsters, and dodging attacks. To that end, when you're playing as Bayonetta, it's the best the series has ever felt.

This is largely due to changes in the series' formula. Bayonetta 3 no longer relegates Infernal Demons to cutscenes at the end of a boss; they're an entire mechanic. So long as you've filled your magic gauge, you can summon these beasts, called Demon Slaves here, almost whenever you want and control them while you fight. I mainly used mine as finishing moves. Capping off a combo with a massive attack from one of my monsters always felt powerful and went a long way in leveling the odds.

Equal to the massive amount of Demon Slaves are Bayonetta's weapons, each with its own gimmick, strength, and disadvantage. I mainly stuck to the lightning-fast, far-reaching Ignis Araneae Yo-Yo as my primary weapon, with the massive Dead End Express hammer-saw hybrid for slower but heavier attacks. Quickly striking with the former, dodging to trigger Bayonetta's signature Witch Time (which slows everything but you), then slamming enemies with the latter before summoning an Infernal Demon as a finisher was constantly entertaining.

Bayonetta 3's 14 chapters constantly fluctuate between settings, sending you quite literally around the world and then some, and even beyond the reaches of space and time. Every level has a unique visual palette and core conceit, and I loved figuring out where in the world I was going next. More than that, I loved the ending of each chapter, which featured a larger-than-life set piece. These include kaiju battles, a fight where a God-sized being blows bubbles, and a literal battle of operatic proportions.

Bayonetta 3's story is the most comprehensible in the series. Which is to say it's not largely gibberish. Bayonetta is charming throughout, as is most of the cast of returning characters, but the larger narrative is a rote multiverse story. This introduces multiple different Bayonettas, and there's a late-game twist that neatly alters the series' lore. But for the most part, the story is largely forgettable.

The story does, however, introduce the weakest parts of Bayonetta 3: all the levels in which you don't play as Bayonetta. Early on, the new character Viola is introduced, a young punk who needs Bayonetta's help saving the multiverse. The handful of Viola's levels are mechanically interesting but don't nail the landing. She's a hack 'n' slash-focused character, and her Witch Time is tied to a parry rather than dodge. That parry window is incredibly tight, and my opening hours were frustrating until I finally got the hang of it, at which point it became only slightly more fun.

Viola did nothing for me. Cosmetically, she's an office worker's approximation of a punk rocker, more Spencer's Gifts than 924 Gilman Street. Even then, she's uninteresting. You spend numerous hours playing as her, and I struggle to think of a single defining characteristic other than her corny mall punk aesthetic. Considering Viola may play a much larger part in potential upcoming games, I'm disappointed she doesn't match the charm of Bayonetta.

But that's a small complaint at the bottom of a mountain of compliments. Bayonetta 3 is an absolute blast. It's bombastic, over-the-top, and extravagant, leaving ruins, literally, in its wake. I may be hesitant about the series' future, but at present, this is the best Bayonetta has ever been.

BY BLAKE HESTER

8.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Platinum Games **RELEASE** October 28 **RATING** M

MUST PLAY

MARIO + RABBIDS SPARKS OF HOPE

Refining the formula

In 2017, Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle proved naysayers wrong by offering a well-crafted tactics game that successfully blended two very disparate franchises. Its sequel, Sparks of Hope, now must live up to fan excitement rather than dispel their doubt. Ubisoft Milan accomplishes this feat by returning to the drawing board, reworking its template, and creating a more streamlined, dynamic experience that maintains strategic depth. The core combat remains strong, but Ubisoft fleshed out the rest of the offerings to create a more wholly engaging package.

Sparks of Hope plays identically to the last game; you engage in tactical turn-based battles as a squad of Mario icons and their Rabbid doppelgängers. However, the grid-based movement is gone. Instead, you freely move your three-member team as you would in a standard third-person game. The game still restricts you to a character's movement range, but positioning feels more natural and kinetic, expanding your offensive flexibility. I love how the looser framework allows me to squeeze more actions from a turn, and combat feels more exciting as a result.

The colorful stages sometimes incorporate real-time elements that put this freedom to good use. One winter stage features timed wind gusts that blow players off the course. I avoid this by simply running past at the right times rather than adhering to a rigid turn order. Sparks of Hope also mixes up its objectives often enough to keep the action from getting too stagnant. I enjoy battling a giant rampaging Wiggler aboard a moving train or shattering dams with bombs to restore a region's water flow.

Sparks of Hope offers enough challenge that poor planning can lead to a punishing team wipe. This time, however, you have the help of Sparks: hybrids of Rabbids and Super Mario Galaxy's Lumas. Equipping these critters to heroes bestows a wide range of powers and perks, such as adding elemental traits to their attacks (like fire and ice). Other Sparks disrupt enemy formations by repelling or attracting foes. One of my favorites temporarily renders a character invisible.

Since each hero can carry two Sparks, they feel more versatile as individuals resulting in more well-rounded teams. I appreciate how enemy vulnerabilities forced me to constantly switch Sparks and prevent me from sticking with the same loadout or team out of complacency. It's also great that party building allows for any combination of heroes, ditching Kingdom Battle's restriction of only using Mario and at least one Rabbid. Since heroes have inherent specialties – Luigi is a long-ranged sniper, Rabbid Peach serves as a healer, and Rabbid Mario doles up-close physical damage, for example – assembling squads feels more interesting since I can mix things up better. The three newcomers, Bowser, Rabbid Rosalina, and Edge, a mysterious tough-as-nails Rabbid, are also good additions.

Expanded overworld exploration adds more engagement outside the battlefield. Multiple themed planets, such as a tropical beach or a mechanic's junkyard, are packed with sidequests, puzzles, and secrets. You're free to mainline the sizable critical path, and you'll largely remain appropriately leveled. But if you do, you miss out on earning planet coins (native currency unlocking special keys, weapon skins, and more), useful combat items like POW blocks, and more Sparks. Tasks include helping a DJ find his missing records or solving a series of entertaining riddles for an enthusiastic explorer. These missions aren't the deepest, and I wish some had more variety; expect to fulfill the same "kill X-amount of X-enemy type" task on each world. But they're enjoyable enough and can be welcome breaks from constant battling.

Upgrading Beep-0 with new abilities to unlock inaccessible areas give worlds a nice, light Metroid feel. I acquired a sonic pulse to shatter weak walls and move blocks and a special light that exposes invisible paths and treasures. Solving environmental puzzles is also fun, offering adequate challenges without feeling tedious.

A charming though uneventful narrative about stopping a cosmic darkness from consuming the galaxy rounds out this delightful package. Like the best sequels, Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope builds upon Kingdom Battle's foundation with smart tweaks and fun additions to emerge as a better game in every way. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Milan, Ubisoft Paris **RELEASE** October 20 **RATING** E10+

FIFA 23

Form is temporary

Much like my Liverpool fandom over the past 20 years, I vacillate between happily obsessive and begrudgingly bewildered with FIFA. Like Liverpool, when FIFA works like a well-oiled machine, play on the field is beautiful, slick, and drives my football-loving brain to elation with dopamine hits. However, FIFA 23 feels like FIFA 22, which was similar to FIFA 21, with additions ranging from mildly impactful to invigorating.

FIFA has focused on one facet of soccer for years: the attack. It's almost arcade-like when you feel how quickly and smoothly players change pace from a controlled dribble to a sprint. Cross-field balls behind defenders for a winger to rush onto are exhilarating. The much-debated trick stick is hard to master, but even a couple of flicks can launch an audacious stepover or the famous Maradona spin to beat a defender.

EA's HyperMotion2 technology enables more natural animations between dribbling and shooting, but it's barely noticeable even during replays. Most goals look similar to those scored in FIFA 22, which isn't bad. It's just that HyperMotion2 doesn't revolutionize the presentation, making it feel like just another yearly update that's a bit smoother.

One positive addition is the ability to play "Moments" in Ultimate Team. Reminiscent of FIFA 2006 World Cup's global challenge mode, you play different scenarios, like overcoming a two-goal deficit beginning with a penalty kick in the 70th minute of a match. These scenarios reward stars used to unlock cards like Ted Lasso and his right-hand-man Coach Beard for Ultimate Team. It's a fun and quick way to grind for cards.

Chemistry in Ultimate Team provides stat boosts to your players if you assemble a team with players in the correct position and of the same nationality or league, and it accumulates differently this year. Players can earn up to three chemistry points, but this time, you can hit chemistry maxes with, for example, an English attack and a La Liga backline, allowing for more satisfying and creative team building.

Career mode is more robust, offering fun for those looking to go through a season solo with their created avatar or a real-world player. Players must complete targets set in-game to please the manager, but it still feels like only scoring and assisting matter to your rating instead of simply staying in position and completing passes. What does spruce it up quite a bit is the addition of Playable Highlights during your player or manager career.

You take control during the Playable Highlight to try to score or stop the opposition from putting the ball in the back of the net. These fun little snapshots of a match let you change a simulated 2-0 outcome to a 4-0 one, but it does make it harder to hit your avatar's goals as you will mostly control others on the team. Off the pitch, you can sign investment deals to earn money and partake in activities to bolster your stats or earn points in either the Maverick, Virtuoso, or Heartbeat personality types. Each unlocks different skills for your player, like stamina or volleying ability, based on whether you prefer dribbling, passing, or shooting.

Adding women's club soccer is long overdue, but it doesn't bring the attention it deserves. You have a scant number of national teams, plus the professional French and English leagues, for use in classic matches, seasons, and cups. However, they aren't in Career or Ultimate Team, meaning if you were hoping to pair up Alex Morgan and Jordan Pefok on your FUT squad, you're out of luck.

There's a famous saying from former footballer Gary Lineker that "football is a simple game – 22 men chase a ball for 90 minutes – and at the end, the Germans always win." I want to make a similar assessment of EA's yearly soccer game: FIFA 23 is a good game – it's flashy, fun to play, and has a lot of modes – but in the end, you realize it's mostly the same game you've been playing for years.

BY LOUIS LIVINGSTON-GARCIA

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** EA Sports
DEVELOPER EA Canada **RELEASE** September 27 **RATING** E

GI
MUST PLAY

GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

Next to godliness

To call the 2018 God of War a sequel almost does it a disservice. Yes, it was a continuation of Kratos' original multi-game journey, but it placed him and a new family in a foreign world to reflect on his past and try to secure his future. Kratos' journey to connect to his son while battling a new legion of distrustful gods was a revelation in both video game storytelling and action, setting a high bar for the inevitable sequel. Ragnarök may lack the unique impact of the prior game, but everything that worked so well the first time comes forward, along with a story that earns the proper definition of the term epic.

Ragnarök basically picks up exactly where the previous left off. In a tradition established early in the God of War series, the opening hours are stellar. The action kicks off immediately, setting up new foes and old friends, but among all the explosive set pieces are quiet moments of engrossing performance showcase. Newcomer Odin and returning scorned mother Freya's characterizations are particularly fantastic, but even the weakest performance in Ragnarök makes the typical video game performance pale in comparison.

The sequel story lacks the singular, compelling goal of the first game: deliver Faye's ashes to the highest peak of the nine realms. By design, Ragnarök's narrative is more ambiguous. Is there such a thing as fate? Do we run to war, or do everything we can to avoid it? Is Odin really *that* bad? How do you deal with a teenager? At times, the long-term goal for the player is not clear, but purposefully, the same can be said for the participating characters. I felt lost sometimes as the main goal went in and out of focus, but the moments when it is fully clear are thrilling and made me sprint past the numerous side quests just to see what happens next, especially during the closing hours. And even in those instances where the focus is softened, the interpersonal moments are strong and moving. An incredible amount of pathos rests under the surface of every character in the game, and to see them all come to grips with their demons in this oppressive world is consistently affecting.

As key as the story has become to this new era of God of War, the combat remains an equally important element. The most negative thing to be said about fighting the various enemies of the nine realms is it isn't radically different or changed from the previous game. You start with more weapons this time around, but the core combos are mostly the same. The library of special attacks you can pull off is larger, but I admit I found my favorites early on and was not particularly compelled to experiment. The types of enemies you fight, on the other hand, has greatly expanded. Mini bosses are numerous, and when they repeat, a new wrinkle is typically added, or it is a fully optional pursuit.

God of War Ragnarök feels a lot like God of War (2018), which is a compliment considering how fantastic that game is. Sony Santa Monica was right to not break what wasn't broken and it has expertly continued the story threads that were left hanging from the previous game. Any complaints about the overall experience (familiar combat, collecting and leveling up equipment isn't particularly interesting) are quickly forgotten in the face of the compelling narrative, believable character relationships, and incredible visuals and animation. Even from its early PlayStation 2 days, the God of War series has always set a high quality bar for itself, and with few exceptions, it has always managed to leap above that bar. God of War Ragnarök is no different. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

Visit GameInformer.com for an extended review

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Santa Monica Studio
RELEASE November 9 **RATING** M

A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

A bold epic

Going into A Plague Tale: Requiem, the follow-up to 2019's A Plague Tale: Innocence, I was prepared for the usual jump in quality and scale that most sequels embrace. I underestimated just how significant that leap would be, though. Calling Requiem a standard sequel is a disservice; developer Asobo Studio has created a Plague Tale epic. It feels Odyssean in scope and storytelling prowess. Although much of it came together for me by the end of my 20-plus hour journey through medieval France, the game feels strained by its sheer size, especially in its first half. Still, I'm more impressed by Requiem's boldness and near across-the-board improvements than not.

Requiem begins roughly six months after the events of Innocence, and while it's possible to piece together what's happening if you're new to the series, I'd really recommend playing Innocence or at least getting caught up on its story before Requiem. As you might guess, the Macula plague begins to rear its ugly head once more, forcing Amicia back into protector mode. Because of this shift, Amicia, Hugo, and returning alchemist Lucas travel south to a mysterious island, searching for answers and a cure.

I was excited about this change in setting and all the "new" it brings to the series, but it takes far too long to reach it. At least half of this game is spent escaping your new home to reach a boat that sails to the island. Don't get me wrong, these 10 to 12 hours are good Plague Tale fun, but they resemble Innocence so much that, at times, it hardly felt like the fresh experience I expected from a sequel, and it mostly dragged on. It didn't help that I experienced various technical issues like distracting framerate drops, visual bugs, and one complete hard crash.

Upon reaching the island, though, my thoughts changed entirely. The story ramps up in pace and excitement, introducing new characters and mysteries. The isle is like a miniature open world, larger than any other area in the series, and this part of the game impressed me the most because everything is firing on all cylinders. Ingenious puzzles that let you manipulate the rats' aversion to fire to make them stealthily take down enemies always satisfied me. The story's twists and turns kept me guessing, as did the island's central mystery.

Elsewhere, Crash Bandicoot-like sequences where Amicia flees from massive hordes of rats toward the screen were especially welcomed breaks from the game's otherwise quieter but stressful stealth moments. These segments speak to the more bombastic nature of Requiem, which at times goes places I could outright spoil here, and I don't think you'd believe me anyway. Beyond the story, new additions to Amicia and Hugo's arsenal, like a one-hit-kill crossbow or Hugo's ability to control rats and feast on the enemies around you, up the ante of the moment-to-moment gameplay.

I was relieved when Requiem's second set of credits rolled. Not because I didn't enjoy playing the game, but because the de Runes' journey in this game is tense and stressful for much of it. At times, it feels too long and oddly sadistic in its focus on inflicting fake-outs, pain, and suffering on the de Runes. Other times, I admired Asobo's command of this series, its rat-infested stealth mechanics, and its grandiose storytelling. Fortunately, the latter edges out the former, and Requiem feels like much more than just a follow-up. With this journey behind me, I'm excited about where the series might go from here, but if Asobo plans a break for the franchise, rest assured that Requiem goes out with an impressive bang.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Asobo Studio **RELEASE** October 18 **RATING** M

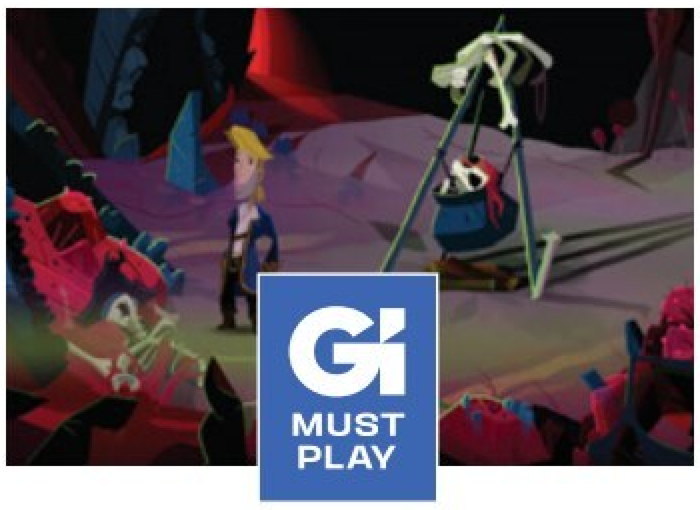
TINYKIN

Tinykin executes its handful of ideas exceptionally well, making it a thoroughly enjoyable and laid-back journey that only requires six to eight hours of your time. Don't let this delightful adventure sneak under your radar.

BY MARCUS STEWART

8.5

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER TinyBuild **DEVELOPER** Splashteam
RELEASE August 30
RATING E10+



GI MUST PLAY

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

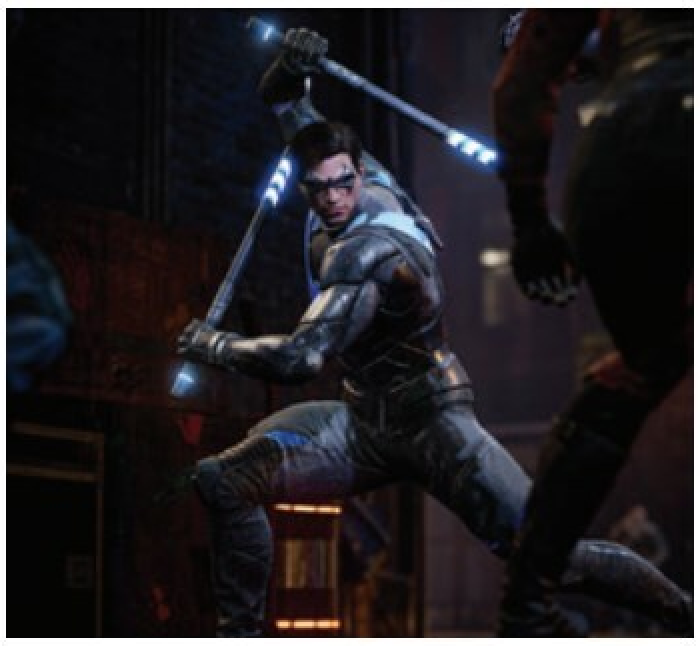
Return to Monkey Island is profoundly nostalgic and relentlessly funny, and I'm once again a kid, laughing at Guybrush's umpteenth last-ditch efforts to distract his opponents with, "Look behind you, a three-headed monkey!"

BY KHEE HOON CHAN

9

PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital, Lucasfilm Games
DEVELOPER Terrible Toybox
RELEASE September 19 **RATING** E10+

GOTHAM KNIGHTS



The young generation of heroes manages to put on a relatively good show even without their mentor along for the ride, albeit one that feels like it's not quite in the same league as the Dark Knight's greatest adventures. **BY MATT MILLER**

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive
DEVELOPER WB Games Montréal, QLOC
RELEASE October 21 **RATING** T

NEW TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

Ultimately, New Tales From The Borderlands feels like more of the same. Fans are likely to enjoy this, but given that it's been nearly eight years, I wanted more of an evolution. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** 2K Games
DEVELOPER Gearbox Software
RELEASE October 21 **RATING** M

DORFROMANTIK

Dorfromantik balances its strategic and cozy elements well, and it's easy to fall into a serene trance of dropping tiles. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8

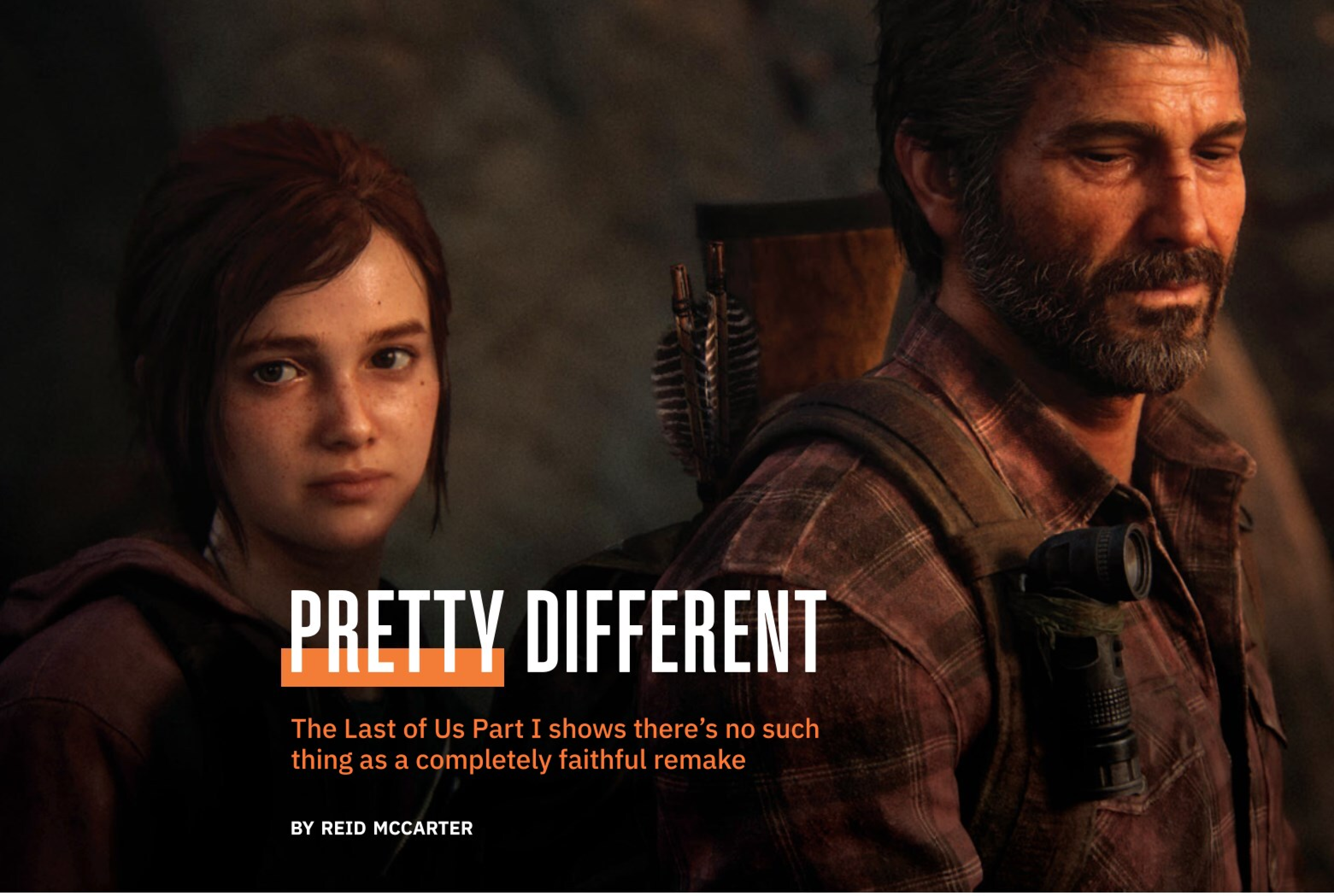
PLATFORM Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation/Puzzle
PUBLISHER Toukana Interactive **DEVELOPER** Toukana Interactive **RELEASE** April 28 (PC), September 29 (Switch) **RATING** E

GHOSTBUSTERS: SPIRITS UNLEASHED

The thrill of Ghostbusting eventually starts to wane, but it takes a while to get to that point, and updates down the road could help to keep those Proton Packs humming. **BY BRYAN VORE** ■

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (5-Player Online)
PUBLISHER IllFonic **DEVELOPER** IllFonic
RELEASE October 18 **RATING** E10+



PRETTY DIFFERENT

The Last of Us Part I shows there's no such thing as a completely faithful remake

BY REID MCCARTER

Includes spoilers for The Last of Us Part I.

Even though it's a remake of a game released in 2013 for the PlayStation 3, The Last of Us Part I is, in most respects, the same game as the original The Last of Us. Players first experiencing the game through the remake will understand the plot in much the same way. They follow the same story to the same conclusion, meeting the same characters and feeling many of the same feelings. They experience the same vision of a post-apocalyptic United States, where one traumatized man, Joel, reckons with his inability to part with his surrogate daughter, Ellie.

But even a remake sticking as close to the original script and general design of its original as Part I is, ultimately, a new game in its own right. By making a game look "better" than it did before, it's changed into something else. Whether in small or large ways, it is altered.

In The Last of Us Part I, the most noticeable changes come by way of the character designs. Developer Naughty Dog updated the game's visuals, improving the graphical fidelity of everything the player sees, from the stomach-churning fungus boils covering a massive "Bloater" monster to the bits of bright green grass poking out from the cracked asphalt of a ghost town's potholed roads. It's the cast's faces, though, that really stick out.

Protagonists Joel and Ellie are more naturally expressive – the elastic cartoonishness of their original faces has been replaced by realistically furrowed brows and, of course, wide-eyed expressions of horror when something tragic plays out before them. They also look pretty different as people, too. Though the change in character design is more dramatic in some cases than others, Joel, in particular, appears dramatically wearier and older than he did before. Wrinkles carve grooves in his tired face. Bruised shadows underline his eyes. The white in his hair and beard highlight his age.

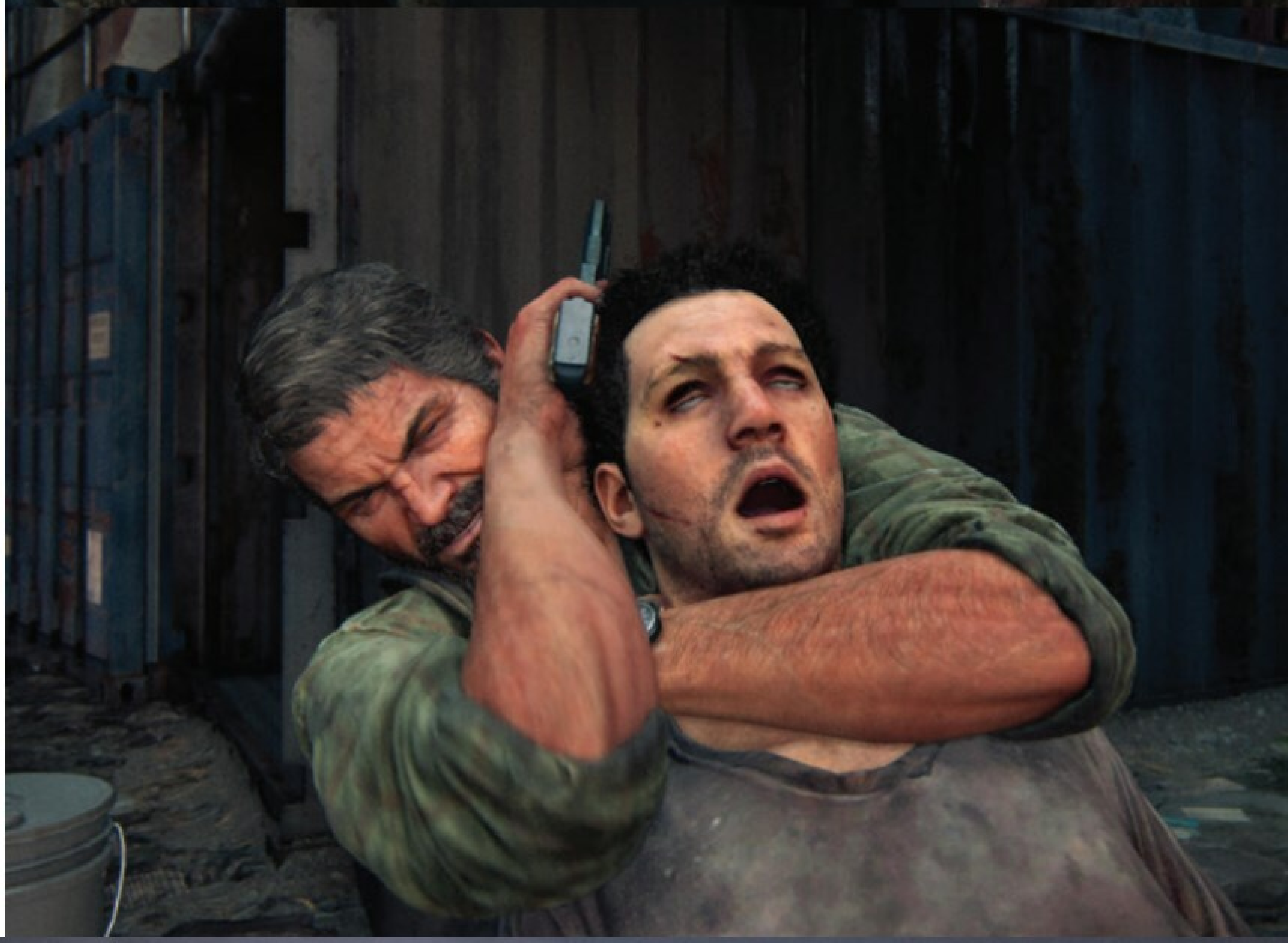
He looks less soulful than before, his expressions drained of a handsome cowboy gleam and replaced with a kind of outward callousness. It makes it harder to imagine him making the sort of heroic turns that both versions of the game suggest for him, but of which he is ultimately incapable. The sense that Joel is a man running out of time – that the world has ground him down and that he has little left to cling to beyond his care for Ellie – makes it less shocking that he makes the selfish decision to stop his companion from giving her life to create a cure for a world-destroying virus. Joel has been redesigned to appear too badly beaten by the horrors of his violent life to believe in a better future.

↑
The Last of Us Part 1 assets by Reid McCarter

This kind of change alters the game's impression by subtly underscoring the original's narrative. In other cases, the remake introduces more dramatic differences. One-off characters, from the hard-bitten residents of the Boston quarantine zone to the many human enemies Joel and Ellie kill on their journey west, now possess more detailed faces that better reflect a sense of individuality among a previously homogenous group. Instead of seeming like they're less important than the main characters in the story, the nameless enemies give a better impression of being real, living people.

The attention paid to their faces erases some of the distinction between essential and unessential characters. As a result, their deaths feel less like the destruction of digital obstacles and more like the brutal extinguishing of human life that the original game wanted its story to communicate. This touch also brings Part I further in line with its sequel, The Last of Us Part II, which attempted to make its violence resound more strongly through touches like having enemies cry out for their friends during combat or, in a sickly feature brought into the remake, too, beg for their lives when wounded.

These visual reminders widen the scope of Part I's world. In the original Last of Us, it was easier to abstract the dozens (or hundreds) of bandits and soldiers killed by Joel and Ellie into something other than humans. Their more personable faces help clarify the story further, showing that an entire nation lives beyond the spotlight shone on the main cast, their fates changed by bloody encounters with the protagonist – or narrowed into a seemingly eternally barbaric future when Joel chooses to save Ellie's life rather than allow her death to provide them with a hopeful future.



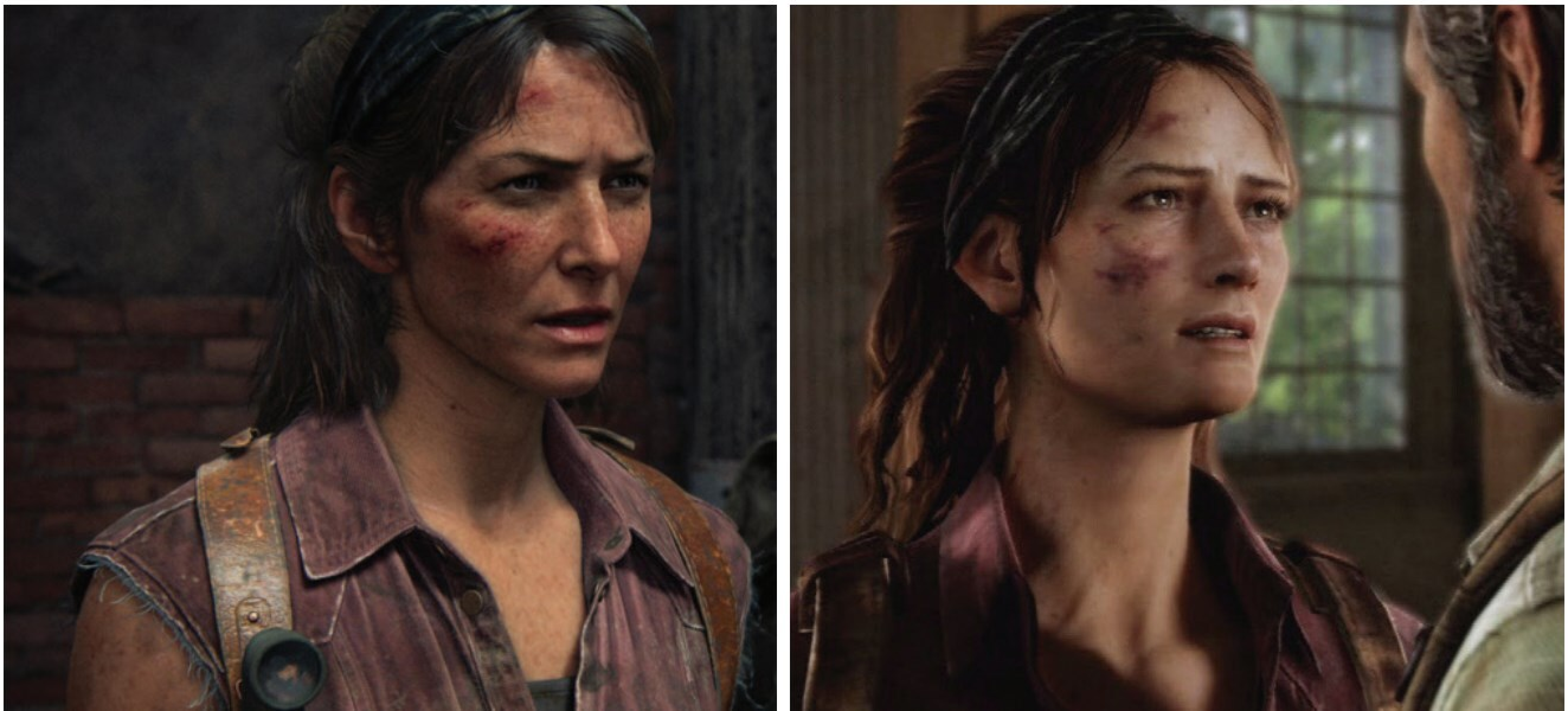
While these design decisions emphasize aspects of the story already present in the original, other significant visual changes alter The Last of Us' characters in ways that fundamentally rethink their role in the narrative.

Tess, Joel's criminal and romantic partner from the early part of the game, has received perhaps the most dramatic redesign. The original Tess was a younger, livelier counterpart to Joel – a companion whose relative youth and similar disregard for the lives of her enemies highlighted that it wasn't just the game's protagonist, but also those around him who had learned to repeatedly kill others and risk their own deaths in order to eke out a living in post-apocalyptic America. Because Tess now looks as worn down and wrung out as Joel, her final moments in the story – sacrificing her life to ensure he and Ellie can escape a group of enemies in Boston – take on a different inflection.

Before, the younger Tess seemed representative of a future generation of post-apocalyptic people, looking for nothing more in life than companionship and the murderous work of smuggling to survive. When she gave her life for Ellie's survival, it meant she ultimately saw the world differently from Joel when it mattered most. This decision, echoed in Ellie's willingness to die for a cure and Joel's final decision to condemn the world to further murder and horror because of his selfishness, meant that the original game positioned Joel as something outside of the youthful possibilities that Ellie and Tess initially represented. With Tess' redesign, this subtle thematic touch slips away. Tess still sacrifices herself, keeping to the original script, but her doing so doesn't carry the same thematic weight it once did.

Examples like these show that a remake is never a genuinely neutral exercise, no matter how closely it hews to the contours of the original work. This dynamic is true

↓
Left: Tess from TLOU Part I remake, Right: Tess from the original game



in the case of a bottom-up reimagining like Final Fantasy VII Remake. And it remains so in manically devotional artistic tributes like Gus Van Sant's 1998 remake of Alfred Hitchcock's classic, 1960 thriller *Psycho*, which recreated as many aspects of the original as possible, from script to shot composition. As evidence of what's lost in even the most faithful remakes: It's tough to find Vince Vaughn's Norman Bates as frighteningly compelling as the original's Anthony Perkins. Regardless of how hard a remake attempts to make something old new again without drastically tweaking its source material in the process, the very act of recreation involves new decisions that always introduce changes.

That's because a remake – even one made by a large team like Naughty Dog – reveals the fingerprints of those who made it. Games are a product of a time and place, of the priorities of their creators at the time of creation, and, of course, of the technological affordances and constraints of their time. When Naughty Dog returned to The Last of Us for Part I, the studio did so with knowledge of the original's successes and failures, commercially *and* critically. It did so with a direct sequel having been made and released. And it did so with nine years of hindsight informing its choices.

The result is that Part I, despite its many similarities, is a different game from the original Last of Us. Its characters are not the exact same characters as before, its world is not the exact same world as before, and the experience of playing it is different enough that it becomes a new work – one that might best be viewed as a different draft of the same novel, or a new cut of the same film. By recognizing those differences, both the 2013 Last of Us and The Last of Us Part I end up looking like more than just an older and newer version of the same story. ■

ONE LAST THING

ARCADE AFTER HOURS

WE TRAVELED TO OSAKA, JAPAN as part of this month's Street Fighter 6 cover trip. While there, we met with Capcom at their headquarters, but two full days of Street Fighter 6 meetings weren't enough; we kept the fun going at a local game center. Director Takayuki Nakayama and producer Shuhei Matsumoto put on a show for the fellow arcade-goers, displaying their skills on Street Fighter II, Street Fighter IV, and Street Fighter V cabinets. While there, Nakayama told us that his first job with the Street Fighter team was delivering the latest Street Fighter IV builds to that very same arcade. ■

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